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## **THE ORDEAL OF DEATH: YEATS'S CUCHULAIN PLAYS**

Dissertação apresentada ao Curso de Pós-Graduação em Literaturas de Língua Inglesa, do Setor de Ciências Humanas, Letras e Artes da Universidade Federal do Paraná, para a obtenção do grau de Mestre em Letras.

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CURITIBA

1996

**UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DO PARANÁ - UFPR**

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God made the senses turn outwards, man therefore looks outwards, not into himself. Now and again a daring soul, desiring immortality, has looked back and found himself. He who knows the soundless, odourless, tasteless, intangible, formless, deathless, supernatural, undecaying, beginningless, endless, unchangeable Reality, springs out of the mouth of Death.

*Katha Upanishad*

*to*

*all my Masters*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my warmest thanks to Professor Anna Stegh Camati, who has been a great and constant friend and whose invaluable supervision and encouragement has made this work possible.

I would also like to state my gratitude to António Fernando de Oliveira da Conceição da Costa, the first one to believe I could do it.

José Mário Mendes receives all my tenderness and appreciation for his great incentive in the last phase of this work.

My thankfulness also extends Mônica de Paula Ceccatto for having lent me some precious books.

I am positively indebted to Marcos Antônio Brandão Lessa and Irene Sydorak, who have so patiently typed most of the versions of this dissertation.

Thanks are also due to CAPES for the Scholarship that has made this accomplishment possible.

Finally, I would like to express my gratefulness for having had the opportunity to develop this study: I have certainly learnt a great deal about life while pursuing this task, which has been an important step within my personal quest.

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## RESUMO

Com base na estrutura tradicional da iniciação no modelo da procura do Santo Graal dentro das peças Cuchulain de William Butler Yeats, esse estudo visa dois objetivos diferentes, porém complementares: primeiramente, eu exploro cada peça como um ritual de iniciação independente; em seguida, analiso as cinco peças representando os diversos estágios do processo global de iniciação de Cuchulain.

Eu mostro que o desejo de Yeats de resgatar as origens ritualísticas do teatro está intimamente ligado ao seu propósito de fazer com que a platéia participe ativamente do ato de tornar presentes ações exemplares a fim de levá-los a assumir uma postura heróica e tirá-los da inércia, numa tentativa de recuperar seu sentido de identidade nacional.

Insatisfeito com a dessacralização do mundo pelo homem moderno, Yeats reage fortemente contra o teatro comercial e o materialismo abusivo de sua época. Ele volta às origens celtas e usa o folclore e a mitologia para proceder ao rejuvenescimento nacional.

Yeats também empresta elementos do altamente simbólico drama Noh japonês, que lhe proporciona uma estética adequada para criar seu próprio teatro ritualístico. O uso da dança extática marca a interpenetração do natural e sobrenatural

e intensifica o caráter sagrado do ritual, uma vez que a dança representa a fusão dos opostos numa síntese momentânea.

No que diz respeito aos princípios filosóficos, eu evidencio que o xamanismo está na base do budismo — que gera o teatro Noh — e do druidismo — que dita a tradição e a doutrina celtas. Além disso, as filosofias oriental e druídica têm muito em comum com o sistema desenvolvido por Yeats em **Uma Visão**, em que ele exterioriza suas preocupações metafísicas, principalmente o sentido da relação íntima de todas as coisas no universo e a busca humana pela perfeição e a suprema unidade do ser.

Através das peças Cuchulain, Yeats aponta para a necessidade de um ponto de equilíbrio, a que se chega após dura batalha entre forças antagônicas quando essas estão em potência máxima; o ritual da morte implica em regeneração; o indivíduo e a civilização como um todo passam por uma morte simbólica que acena para a possibilidade de renovação. Yeats acredita que a função da arte é revelar a realidade mais profunda além das aparências superficiais, e que o papel do poeta é semelhante ao do salvador ou xamã, cuja missão é curar e transformar a sociedade. Utilizando-se da experiência estética, ele pretende promover uma mudança intelectual em seus compatriotas a fim de encorajá-los a lutar pelos seus ideais e a reestabelecer o *illud tempus*.



## ABSTRACT

Drawing upon the traditional structure of the initiation grail-type quest of William Butler Yeats's Cuchulain series, this study aims at two different though complementary objectives: first, it explores each play as an independent initiation ritual; second, it analyses the five pieces as the several stages of development of Cuchulain's initiation process as a whole.

I have demonstrated that Yeats's desire to rescue the ritualistic origins of the theatre is intimately connected with his aim to make the audience participate in the re-actualization of exemplary actions so as to encourage them to assume a heroic posture and to shake them out of their inertia in an attempt to restore their sense of national identity.

Discontent with the desacralization of the world by modern man, Yeats strongly reacts against the commercial theatre and the abusive materialism of his age. He goes back to Celtic roots and uses folklore and mythology to proceed the national rejuvenation.

Yeats also borrows elements from the highly symbolic Japanese Noh drama, which provides him with an adequate aesthetics to create his own ritualistic theatre. The use of the climactic dance marks the interpenetration of the natural and

supernatural and intensifies the sacred character of the ritual, since the dance represents the fusion of opposites into momentary synthesis.

As concerning the philosophical principles, I have supplied evidence that shamanism is at the basis of both Buddhism — which gives birth to the Noh theatre — and Druidism — which dictates the Celtic tradition and doctrine. Besides, the Oriental and Druidic philosophies have much in common with the system developed by Yeats in **A Vision**, in which he conveys his metaphysical preoccupations, mainly the sense of interrelatedness of all things in the universe and the human search for perfection and ultimate unity of being.

Throughout the Cuchulain plays Yeats points out the need for equilibrium, which is achieved only after a hard struggle between antagonistic forces that are at high power; the ordeal of death implies regeneration; the individual and civilization as a whole undergo symbolical death, which signals the possibility of renewal. Yeats believes that the function of art is to reveal a deeper reality beyond superficial appearances and that the role of the poet is parallel to that of the saviour or the shaman, whose mission is to heal and transform society. By means of the aesthetic experience, he intends to promote an intellectual change in his countrymen so as to encourage them to fight for their ideals and to re-establish the *illud tempus*.

## INTRODUCTION

*What the world's million lips are  
thirsty for,  
Must be substantial somewhere.  
W.B. Yeats, The Shadowy Waters*

In the nineteenth century, after years of dependence under the rule of more powerful unions, different nations all over Europe attempt at establishing their identity. In this search, they realize that the knowledge of their past might be a powerful weapon to strengthen their roots and rescue the genuine emotion of the race. These explorations reveal an impulse that had come to the fore “during the Napoleonic wars, partly as a reaction against French neoclassical and revolutionary cosmopolitanism.” (PERKINS, 1976, p. 25). The spirit of the age is based on the principle according to which “for a man to know himself he must know his nation, and for a nation to know itself it must know its past, particularly the richness of its primitive imagination stored up in its folk-lore and legends.” (EDWARDS, 1979, p. 191). Consequently, primitive imagination and race memory are given an important role; interwoven with other Romantic motives, a study of the folklore is emphasized since the early epics and legends of every race are supposed to embody the racial identity in its purest form.

Fierce nationalism revives. Poland, Norway and Denmark try to fortify their cultural identity. In Ireland, the patriotic and national awareness is raised to special intensity by confrontation to English rule. Poets in every European country make the most of folklore retelling myth and heroic stories in an attempt to reactivate the imaginative heritage of the people. It is a common belief that “in the rejuvenation which depended on the recognition of *place* and the *past*, the poet was to have a task of first importance, for there was magic in poetry, able to move a people into action.” (EDWARDS, 1979, p. 191). It is in this mood that a new attempt is made to found an Irish theatre since the Dublin playhouse is still subject to the theatre of the metropolis, London. In the flow of the events, the active politician and poet Thomas Davis (1814-1845) becomes the predecessor of cultural nationalism in Ireland. Acquainted with European movements, in 1842 he starts the publication of *The Nation*, a journal he uses to broadcast and confirm his reverence for the country’s past. He desires to make Ireland a nation and intends to direct the popular mind towards the great end of Nationality. DAVIS states, *apud* EDWARDS (1979, p. 193), that this ideal will inflame and purify the Irish people with “a lofty and heroic love of country — a Nationality of the spirit as well as the letter,”<sup>1</sup> a Nationality which may come to be stamped upon their manners, their literature and their deeds. He creates a movement called Young Ireland<sup>2</sup> and positively incentivates poets, writers and artists to relate Irish scenes. Nevertheless, he dies in 1845 and soon afterwards there follows the tragic Famine which makes all the ideals to be postponed and substituted for more practical affairs.

In the meantime, Norway is trying to get rid of the imposed Danish culture<sup>3</sup> and to establish its own spiritual and cultural unity. Ibsen has a fundamental role in the construction of the Norwegian theatre — and his use of national history, legends and folklore is recurrent mainly in the early plays, which are anticipations of the later Irish theatre.<sup>4</sup>

Several efforts had been made over the centuries to found an Irish theatre. Dramatists like Charles Shadwell and Thomas Sheridan attempted to create a drama with Irish subjects, trying to relate the theatre to the nationalistic sentiments and the patriotic demands of Ireland. But their plays and masques were not successful. The Dublin theatre remained subject to the theatre of the capital city and for this reason many talented authors like Congreve, Sheridan himself, Wilde and Shaw wrote for the London theatre.

Being born in Dublin towards the end of the nineteenth century, William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) could not escape from the influence of the Irish literary revival in the 1890's. Seduced by the ideas of national pride and the rescuing of their tradition as a nation, he saw in Celtic mythology and Irish themes a rich source for his poems and plays.

In the late nineteenth century, the London audiences are bombarded with an abusive commercialism; the materialistic values of the middle classes give birth to a mentality which makes their great cultural inheritance obscure. Yeats's contemporary English playwrights "were busy developing a realistic stage technique, pre-occupied with what they called 'problems' and what Yeats called 'the surface of life.'"

(ELLIS-FERMOR, 1971, p. 95). Revolted against this commercialism<sup>5</sup>, Yeats wishes to create a national drama, a theatre which would dissolve the state of decadence which is psychologically more vicious than at first appears, for it involves that utter debasement of the imagination of the audience from which recovery, if possible at all, is slow and painful. (ELLIS-FERMOR, 1971, p. 3). He rejects the realist/naturalist drama of his age; in his opinion, it assigns to the spiritual reality a secondary plane. He directs all his efforts towards the restoration of the ritualistic origins of the theatre not only to arouse patriotic feeling and incite his fellowmen to fight but also to rescue their cultural and racial identity.

Yeats wishes to create a theatre which would support the revival of poetry as a living material and bring literary value into the drama. According to this perspective, in 1891 he founds the Irish Literary Society in London. One year later, the National Literary Society is founded in Dublin. In 1899, under the auspices of the latter institution, the Irish Literary Theatre<sup>6</sup> is finally established. In 1904, Miss A. F. Horniman converts the Mechanics' Institute in Dublin into the Abbey Theatre, and gives "the Society the free use of it, together with an annual subsidy." (ARMSTRONG, 1970, p. 8). Yeats truly believes that a vital dramatic movement that will open up a way of expression that is in the people themselves has been started. In fact, "the Irish Dramatic Movement is significant not only because of the place which, by intrinsic and historic interest, it holds in the panorama of the world's drama but because of the light which can be thrown on fundamental aesthetic laws by a body of

dramatic art comparable with the great drama of other ages.” (ELLIS-FERMOR, 1971, p. 8).

Yeats aspires to have a genuine public for his poetic drama; he intends to transcontextualize ancient legends, folklore, myth and history into plays which have aesthetic as well as critical value. He openly states he prefers “plays which attack a more eternal devil than the proselytiser. He has been defeated, and the arts are at their best when they are busy with battles that can never be won. It is possible, however, that we may have to deal with passing issues until we have re-created the imaginative tradition of Ireland, and filled the popular imagination again with saints and heroes.” (YEATS, 1973, p. 79).

In the attempt to re-vivify Irish ideals which seemed to be lost, he tries to preserve the living language of the countrymen as the great symbol of cultural identity and the vehicle of poetry. He desires “to restore the Irish mind to its own habitat, to free it from the distracting and falsifying pressure of an alien artistic culture.” (ELLIS-FERMOR, 1971, p. 12). Therefore, he proposes not a romantic return to the past but to recover the Celtic qualities of melancholy, other-worldliness, bravery in defeat, sensitivity to verbal and musical magic, imagination, impulse, instinct, emotion and spontaneity which his English contemporaries had abandoned.

He understands that “the creation of an emotion of beauty is the only kind of literature that justifies itself.” (YEATS, 1973, p. 93). Thus language must be live since it is the main vehicle for conveying such an emotion. Yeats defends the use of living words, “words that have the only thing that gives literary quality — personality,

the breath of men's mouths." (YEATS, 1973, p. 95). He believes that, if the creative writers busy themselves with poetry and their countrymen, two things that have always intermingled in life as on the stage, they may achieve the revival of poetic drama and ideals and recover a lost art. He assumes that common people prefer poetical to realistic theatre<sup>7</sup> and uses his poetic drama as a means of showing that which he considered to be the true reality, that of the soul. With skillful artistry and no help from any dramatic tradition then at work in Europe, Yeats succeeds in leading

the drama of the English-speaking people back to the paths of poetry and power, making way, in both countries, for the first body of plays which can seriously compare with the Elizabethans. To do this by imitation was impossible. He knew [...] it must be raised again from the earth, not in its material or its form or its language only (though he provided for all of these) but in the spirit. His determination to return to the thought and speech of the people was more than a wise appreciation or a hitherto unexplored field, it was an instinctive recognition of the roots of poetic truth. He believed that the drama must be born again or perish utterly. (ELLIS-FERMOR, 1971, p. 61-62).

Yeats establishes the living imagination as the fundamental principle of his work. He and his group accept no external interference as concerning aesthetic, moral, social or political views. They take drama as the most immediately powerful form of literature, the most radiant image of life; therefore, they propose the return of the old and strict simplicity and start a total reform of the theatre regarding plays, speech, gesture, acting, scenery and costume with the intention of making the theatre a place of intellectual excitement, beauty and truth.

Yeats rejects the idea of writing under restrict bounds; for him, the true artist should always stick to creativity and artistic integrity and not allow opinion to master his work and put his imagination into handcuffs. Actually, "the creative artist's urge to help is too great, the horizon of this philanthropy too spacious, for his purview to be



limited to the area bounded by any one nation. [...] and his art speaks, not to nations, but to individual men. *But to men of the future*. This is the faith which characterizes him, his torment and his distinction.” (NIETZSCHE, 1983, p. 250).

Yeats discredits even the writing of plays with an exclusive patriotic intention since, according to him, it might arise opinion but not be moving enough as to touch the heart. For him, literature is a living being,

the great teaching power of the world, the ultimate creator of all values, and it is this, not only in the sacred books whose power everybody acknowledges, but by every movement of imagination in song or story or drama that height of intensity and sincerity has made literature at all. Literature must take the responsibility of its power, and keep all its freedom: it must be like the spirit and the wind that blows where it listeth; it must claim its right to pierce through every crevice of human nature, and to describe the relation of the soul and the heart to the facts of life and of law, and to describe that relation as it is, not as we would have it be. (YEATS, 1973, p. 117).

This passage corroborates Yeats’s view of literature as something different from journalism; the literary text can turn the imagination to whatever is vital and perennial in life.

He asserts Irish poetry and stories were meant to be spoken or sung, while English literature belongs to the world that reads and writes. Still defending the living imagination, he looks for the centre of his art in speech; according to him,

before men read, the ear and the tongue were subtle, and delighted one another with the little tunes that were in words [...]. They loved language, and all literature was then, whether in the mouth of minstrels, players, or singers, but the perfection of an art that everybody practised, a flower out of the stem of life. And language continually renewed itself in that perfection, returning to daily life out of that finer leisure, strengthened and sweetened as from a retreat ordered by religion. (YEATS, 1973, p. 212).

Yeats believes in the power of old recitation and remoteness. When the poem is spoken in the person of a peasant farmer, fisherman, Gaelic bard, or ancient chief, it becomes the voice of the primitive and the folk. The distance from actuality and

nearness to imaginative reality makes possible the narration of a series of extraordinary events which are given credit, for the audience trusts the wise words of the old reciter, who has seen everything and knows all the secrets of the human heart. His craft is allusion, never illusion; what he tells is always distant, noble, mysterious, admirable; the deeds narrated are authentic, fabulous; the words he uses are kind, precise, evocative, magic, almost incantatory; the allusions lead the hearer to remote lands where the unfamiliar is a part of daily life. And the art of speech is fundamental; the reciter speaks about universal truths of human nature, heightening and even transcending any form of real life, helping with the imaginative re-creation of national history and legend.

Yeats tries to preserve the values of the old world when mankind was spiritually alive. "National rejuvenation is to be won under the guidance of the poet who keeps alive the knowledge of the world of spirit which earlier ages more instinctively knew and enshrined in folk literature." (EDWARDS, 1979, p. 197). That is one of the reasons why he criticizes the popular commercial art, which most of the times has substituted for the real and perennial values the exclusively superficial ones.

The National movement in Ireland is democratised in the beginning of the twentieth century; the leadership is then in the hands of a large number of young men organized in clubs and societies. They try to fight for a worthy cause but instead of persuading and explaining they impose their opinions using the unworthy instruments of tyranny and violence. About a decade later, the new generation is weary of their methods and wish for "individual sincerity, the eternal quest for truth." (YEATS,

1973, p. 228). And the truth they pursue is not external or historical but is a part of their personal vision. Yeats is then hopeful with this generation for it tries to fight for the old vigorous roots that shelter in their blood the seeds of both good and evil, weed and flower, kindness and violence; and the life Yeats defends and depicts has the same strength and power, with forms of emotion and thought which are peculiarly Irish.

Revolted against a superficial patriotism, Yeats affirms that “nationality is in the things that escape analysis. We discover it, as we do the quality of saltiness or sweetness, by the taste, and literature is a cultivation of taste.” (YEATS, 1973, p. 234). He begins fighting for the re-establishment of an active Irish life comparing what he saw about him with what he heard of in Galway cottages. But he acknowledges that it was from the novelists and poets that he learned in part his symbols of expression.<sup>8</sup> By means of an original relation to Irish life he develops in himself a new character which he thinks the literary mind of Ireland should present: not mere sparkling faggots but a permanent fire; not something external but an inner coherence that should be the product of an internal belief; not just thought but creation and action.

For the artist, creation is action. The true artist does not just describe the world and the chronicle of facts but has instants of revelation which delineate the finer elements of national character for generations. He is the ‘athena of the race’ (POUND, 1968, p. 58), the first to receive the impressions of the outer world and to

depict them under a new light. He is the one whose powerful mind anticipates and gives birth to innate ideas.

Yeats insists on the diffusion of universal values that carry intimations of eternal truth. Even when describing simple people, he does not intend to exploit local colour or just write drama which possesses a temporary novelty, “for in literature, unlike science, there are no discoveries, and it is always the old that returns.” (YEATS, 1973, p. 197). He believes in the subordination of all parts to the whole, in the unity of all things in the world, and that subjective art exists for those who share a traditional knowledge, a memory of poetry and emotion. He likes plays that remind him of something that exists beyond the world. As he says, he desires “a mysterious art, always reminding and half-reminding those who understand it of dearly loved things, doing its work by suggestion, not by direct statement, a complexity of rhythm, colour, gesture, not space-pervading like the intellect, but a memory and a prophecy.” (YEATS, 1973, p. 255).

Yeats prefers suggestion to the gross intelligibility of writers who indulge in hardening, externalising and deforming a precious subject for the sake of objectivity. He would probably agree with RIGHTER (1975, p. 40) when he asserts that “myth is the supreme vehicle of the creative imagination and stands as an absolute opposite to the narrowly mimetic.” Added to that, he also witnessed “the revival of interest in arcane sciences developed perhaps as a reaction against the reigning Darwinist and positivist beliefs and middle-class Christianity.” (BIDERMAN, 1985, p. 81).

Yeats himself joined the Hermetic Students of the Golden Dawn, where he matured his own belief in magic, occult arts and mysticism. Besides that, the reading of Boehme, Blake and Swedenborg led him to the development of a personal symbolism.<sup>9</sup> He differed from the French symbolists since his own concept of symbolism assumes “a religious dimension the French knew nothing of. It was not merely a technique, but a belief.” (STYAN, 1983, p. 61). Within several philosophical questionings, Yeats kept wondering if the long decline of the arts was not the result of the desacralization of the world and the contemporary declining faith in an unseen reality.

Attracted to symbolism and the occult, Yeats believed that symbols were a powerful medium “to evoke the world beyond the senses, and reveal the inner elements of rhythm and pattern that distinguish one living form from another.” (STYAN, 1983, p. 61). To express that, he needed a form and a style which condensed his beliefs as well as his ideas about drama. By 1916, Ezra Pound, his friend and secretary, introduces him to the manuscripts of Ernest Fenollosa.<sup>10</sup> The Irish poet then learns a great deal of the Japanese Noh drama, in which he sees “a traditional and esoteric, symbolical and anti-naturalist art for the few.” (PERKINS, 1976, p. 584). This art suits Yeats’s desire to create a poetic theatre, “an unpopular theatre and an audience like a secret society where admission is by favour and never to many.”<sup>11</sup> (YEATS, 1973, p. 254).

Since its very beginning, Noh is closely related to the Buddhist and Shinto temples.<sup>12</sup> Noh results from the combination of chant, dance, declamation, poetry,

instruments used to obtain the total theatre. Even though it is classical, Noh is a stylized and sophisticated syncretism of both the sacred and the profane (SUZUKI, 1977, p. 38, 40) and comprises the spirit of liberty and great variety in the compositions. Noh is not static; its action flows softly. It is an abstract art of interior dynamization, aspects which are certainly responsible for its survival up to this day.

The Noh writers use the best of mythology, history, literature (both verse and prose), national legends, Zen philosophy, fiction and real life. A single poem or a few lines of a masterpiece can be the starting point for a great play. Similarly, Yeats's work comprises an amalgamation of old legends, history, classical subjects and contemporary life. Besides, in the Cuchulain plays the underlying plot is generally taken from sagas which narrate an episode of the hero's life.

The Noh also praises economy and concentration of action and it is poetic drama *par excellence*. It perfectly fits the ideal of anti-naturalist and subjective theatre which Yeats has been trying to create; sophisticated and highly symbolic, this aristocratic and stylized theatre has aesthetic beauty, remoteness and truth as its main principles. The play's style itself is refined and precious, almost to the degree of being cryptic. Verse is used in the more elevated and lyrical passages, where spiritual and emotional qualities are at their height. Prose serves for the simpler speeches. Yeats's **Plays for Dancers** are a variant of the ritualistic Noh drama, in which, "he retained the Japanese concept of masks, dances, choruses, and formalized diction, the folding and unfolding of the symbolic cloth to the accompaniment of strings and percussion

instruments — but he grafted the whole ceremony onto Cuchulain and Christ legends and to one-act verse plays.” (GASSNER; QUINN, 1973, p. 926).

Yeats’s skilful use of both verse and prose in a modified Noh style arouses a feeling of strangeness which provokes inward emotion. It takes the audience far from a realistic atmosphere and subtly leads it to a supernatural world where poetry lives in essence. The poet recaptures the Oriental Taoist doctrines of ‘Back to Nature’ and ‘One with Nature or the Universe (LEE, 19--, p. 302-303). His stress on interiority, however, has awakened paradoxical criticism.<sup>13</sup> some state that emphasis on psychology and spirituality deviates the writer from plot, making it less interesting; others state that “such a structure, a journey from the exterior to the psychic interior and back, permits great dramatic intensity.” (RIMER, 1978, p. 121).

Actually, the aesthetic experience one feels while reading Yeats’s work is not totally rational; they plays embody “some primary human relation or emotion; and the poetic sweetness or poignancy of this is carried to its highest degree by carefully excluding all such obtrusive elements as a mimetic realism or vulgar sensation might demand. The emotion is always fixed upon idea, not upon personality. [It is] elevated to the plane of universality by the intensity and purity of treatment.” (FENOLLOSA, 1917, p. 120).

Yeats, then, influenced by Lady Augusta Gregory and her compilation of the Irish sagas in **Cuchulain of Muirthemne**, starts writing plays whose roots are founded in ancient legends and folklore mainly, achieving the intensity he desired by

means of the Japanese Noh style. In 1904 he writes **On Baile's Strand**, the first play of the Cuchulain cycle; the last one, **The Death of Cuchulain**, is written in 1939.

It takes him thirty-five years to recreate the legend of the bravest Irish hero, Cuchulain. He goes back to the remoteness of his country's past in order to find old values and ideals. He rejects modernity and wants to grasp the unspoilt primitive creative power to arouse the patriotic spirit of the Irish people. Following the aesthetic principle of simplicity and naturalness, he abandons everything which is not necessary and which might deviate the attention of his selective audience. Yeats's use of the Noh techniques perfectly fits this purpose. But since his appropriation of the Japanese ritualistic drama has been widely explored by a great number of critics<sup>14</sup>, I will not concentrate on these aspects and will focus on issues that have not been touched upon as yet: Cuchulain's process of initiation, his development and the growing of his self-assurance as a human being and as a universal hero.

A close analysis of the five plays that compose the Cuchulain sequence has revealed that the initiatory quest pattern can be detected in each play as a separate unit as well as in the sequence of plays considered as five units of a complete whole, i. e., each play constitutes one step of the initiation process.

Although the mythological/anthropological approach is not new in the exegesis of literary works, this specific kind of approach has not been applied to the Cuchulain plays as a whole; therefore, it is my intention to trace the initiatory ordeal that Cuchulain submits to, from departure to return, to analyse the anthropological



implications of his heroic deeds and attitudes as well as to evaluate the meaning and importance of such exemplary actions for the twentieth century audience.

Actually, the standard path of his mythical adventure reveals an archetypal initiation structure; in order to analyse it, one can borrow methods from philosophy, psychology, cultural anthropology or sociology, always having in mind the history of religions in primitive societies all over the world.

There are several kinds and innumerable variants of initiation patterns, which correspond to diverse social structures and varied cultural horizons. Generally, initiation is understood as a complex of rites and oral teaching which lead to a radical change in the religious and social status of the initiate to be; at the end of the initiation process, the neophyte becomes *another*. ELIADE states that “initiatorial death signifies both the end of the ‘natural,’ acultural man, and the passage to a new mode of existence, that of a being ‘born to the spirit,’ i.e., one who does not live exclusively in an ‘immediate’ reality. Thus the initiatorial ‘death’ and ‘resurrection’ represent a religious process through which the initiate becomes *another*, patterned on the model revealed by gods or mythical ancestors.” (ELIADE, 1969, p. 115). Initiation introduces the novice into a world of spiritual values; it is only after a spiritual preparation that he acquires the sacred knowledge.

For the initiate, the whole universe is infused with the sacred, containing an aspect which transcends the finite and makes it immeasurable. In accordance with Anne BANCROFT (1987, p. 2),

It is one of the tragedies of modern western religion that it has divorced itself from its myths and relies only on its history, which makes the living deity into an abstract. Once, though, the great human experiences were based on cosmic myths which operated in sacred time and space. They implied a deep sense of relationship with nature. [...] In such a climate everything was symbolised, so that it pointed beyond itself to a greater truth.

Modern man has desacralized the world; he claims himself to be a 'historical being,' product of this environment and result of "a natural process." (ELIADE, 1969, p. 115). The man of ancient societies, on the other hand, believes himself to be the result of a mythical history, of a series of events which took place at the beginning of the world. This absence of historical conscience makes this man more attuned with myth and makes him eager to go back to that which he considers to be the roots of mankind: the sacred.

Every retrogression to these roots implies a ritual repetition of the cosmogony, which is preceded by a symbolical return to Chaos. Chaos is conceived as something previous to every creation, a state in which everything exists in essence but not yet in form. Going back to Chaos, therefore, meeting essences is a task which only a few chosen or initiates are able to accomplish. The few initiates undergo a process of initiation that, according to the society in which they are inserted has different characteristics, but whose main core is the same. Initiation rituals imply symbolical death, which corresponds to a provisional return to Chaos. This death represents the end of one way of being: that of ignorance and irresponsibility. Through ritual death one becomes *another* and acquires a new mode of being, heavily based on spiritual values.

Participation in spiritual life is possible thanks to the religious experiences one faces during the initiation process. Every single rite of rebirth or resurrection shows that the novice has achieved a different mode of existence, not accessible to those who have not met the initiation trial and who have not known symbolical death. Initiatory death is absolutely essential to the beginning of spiritual life. Its function is to prepare the path for a new and superior mode of being. It is only after this movement backwards to chaos which the world “through the effect of ritual is given a ‘form’” (ELIADE, 1974, p. 11) and can be transformed into Cosmos and be reorganized.

As already mentioned, initiation patterns vary a lot; nevertheless, most of them have a common basis and different rituals stand for the same or for similar symbols. Within a great variety of ritualistic processes, I believe shamanism can be used as a basis to illustrate most of the trials undergone by Cuchulain, whose mythological adventure follows the *separation — initiation — return* formula, as described by CAMPBELL (1973, p. 30). In accordance with this standard path, the hero ventures forth from his common reality into a world of supernatural happenings; he undergoes several trials and triumphs over all perilous forces; after overcoming all the difficulties of the hero-task, he comes back from the mysterious journey with the power to award favours to his fellowmen.

Shamanistic societies generally “believe in a lost paradise, a time when heaven and earth were one, when man could talk to the gods and to animals, when the universe had complete access to itself with one shared language for all creatures.”

(BANCROFT, 1987, p. 21). In this sense, they are similar to Celtic society, which “fulfilled the criteria of a society in which one would expect to find shamanism and so we do — in the form of Druidism.” (RUTHERFORD, 1986, p. 124).

The Celts became renowned as great warriors; they divided society into three groups: the free men, the military aristocracy, and “the druids, who were learned priests, shamans and judges.” (BANCROFT, 1987, p. 86). Their legends and spiritual beliefs are accurately recorded in the early Irish, Scottish and Welsh literature. When their oral teachings “were at last written down, there was considerable Christian pressure to minimise and disguise them. But Ireland in particular was a refuge for the Celts.” (BANCROFT, 1987, p. 88). Thus, being aware of the existence of shamanic roots in Celtic society and their remarkable presence in the sagas in which Yeats based his Cuchulain plays, I saw the possibility of analysing the hero’s adventure on this light.

Before discussing the plays, it is advisable to refer back to the saga of Cuchulain, which certainly displays the quest motive and initiatory pattern. The legend tells us that Cuchulain, from tender age, shows a strong predisposition to face an ordeal. At the age of seven the little boy overhears his master, Cathbad the Druid, saying, “If any young man should take arms to-day, his name will be greater than any other name in Ireland. But his span of life will be short.” (GREGORY, 1979, p. 28). The little lad, not afraid of having a short life but eager to see his name and deeds spread all over Ireland, immediately decides to take arms that day.<sup>15</sup> Possessed by enormous wrath, he fights and beats some heroes supposed to be invincible.

However, wrath and heat would not leave him; he is put into three tanks of cold water to quench his ire. Cuchulain's<sup>16</sup> initiatory heating points out a "magico-religious experience" (ELIADE, 1975, p. 85) which is the basis for a deeper learning, the path of initiation itself. The other aspects of the saga which disclose a process of initiation will be discussed together with the analysis of the five Cuchulain plays, in which the saga of the young hero also reveals an archetypal initiatory ordeal whose main traits can be related to shamanism.

In fact, shamanism can be seen as "a universal mode linking man with the cosmos by means of the magical journey." (DRURY, 1987, p. 11). In his ecstasy, the shaman "re-enacts the prefallen state by transcending the time barrier — the existence of time being thought of as a consequence of the 'fall.'" (BANCROFT, 1987, p. 21). Cuchulain's mythical journey and life-enhancing return is an attempt to rescue the lost paradise of primordial times.

My intention is to discuss the aspects mentioned above following the mythical/anthropological approach; thus I have selected the quest pattern of initiation as the theoretical basis of my work, mainly the methodology used by anthropologists and social historians such as Mircea Eliade (**Ferreiros e alquimistas; Rites and symbols of initiation; Shamanism; The myth of the eternal return; The quest; The sacred and the profane**) and Joseph Campbell (**As máscaras de Deus; The hero of a thousand faces**).<sup>17</sup>

Each play of the Cuchulain cycle will be compared and contrasted with the legends that constitute its source, showing how Yeats transcontextualizes the ancient

tales in order to suit his own ends. He returns to the ancient heroic myths dealing with legendary and historical figures to suggest guide-lines for conduct in our time.

Despite the fact that the plays were written in a different order, I shall deal with them in the sequence the initiatory pattern suggests. Therefore, my ideal order for reading the plays is as follows: **At the Hawk's Well** (written in 1917), **The Green Helmet** (1910), **On Baile's Strand** (1904), **The Only Jealousy of Emer** (1919) and **The Death of Cuchulain** (1939).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> DAVIS goes on saying, *apud* EDWARDS (1979, p. 193), that “National poetry is the very flowering of the soul — the greatest evidence of its health, the greatest excellence of its beauty... It shows us magnified, and ennobles our hearts, our intellects, our country and our countrymen — binds us to the land by its condensed and gem-like history, to the future by examples and aspirations.”

<sup>2</sup> The poetry of Young Ireland, including David’s own, was republished as **Spirit of the Nation**, and was immensely influential in succeeding generations.

<sup>3</sup> Norway had won her independence from Denmark in 1814.

<sup>4</sup> It must be remembered that the outstanding name of Ibsen should not be associated exclusively with social drama, an early phase of his work. Later, he gave emphasis to the symbolic plays, which deal with psychological and spiritual problems and stand for more universal themes.

<sup>5</sup> EDWARDS (1979, p. 199) recognizes that “the aridity of the London commercial theatre in late-nineteenth-century London, extending of course to its satellite theatre in Dublin, was to Yeats a sign both of the materialist values of the Saxons and of the waning of their cultural greatness. He wished as much to bring poetry and literary value into the drama as to create a theatre for Ireland.”

<sup>6</sup> For Yeats and his group, each of the three words of the Irish Literary Theatre is of the same importance.

<sup>7</sup> Yeats criticizes the poverty of the naturalistic drama, “Put the man who has no knowledge of literature before a play of this kind and he will say, as he has said in some form or other in every age at the first shock of naturalism, ‘Why should I leave my home to hear but the words I have used there when talking of the rates?’ And he will prefer to it any play where there is visible beauty or mirth, where life is exciting, at high tide as it were.” (YEATS, 1971, p. 276).

<sup>8</sup> Boehme, Blake and Swedenborg are some of the writers Yeats acknowledges to have influenced him.

<sup>9</sup> Yeats's personal symbolism is developed in **A Vision** (1977). The volume displays a metaphysical system in which esoteric doctrine, human experience (both personal and historical) as well as aesthetic experience are intermingled. He creates a cosmogony, a cosmic structure of the world as Dante, Milton and Blake had done before him. In this book, he explains the principal symbols of his work.

<sup>10</sup> Ernest Francisco Fenollosa (1853-1908) learned Noh chant from Umêuaka Minôru. Philosopher, Fenollosa was the first one to research and divulge the Japanese art in the Occident; he translated some Noh plays and studied the Noh style for about twenty years, despite a few interruptions.

<sup>11</sup> Yeats states he wants to create this selective theatre, "an audience of fifty, a room worthy of it (some great dining-room or drawing-room), half a dozen young men and women who can dance and speak verse or play drum and flute and zither." (YEATS, 1973, p. 255).

<sup>12</sup> In fact, the influence of Buddhism is not something new. "In the Middle Ages, reflecting the trend toward eclectic union of Shinto and Buddhism, itinerant monks [...] traveled to remote areas, where they practiced austerities. As a means of propagating their faith, they created their unique Noh, on the basis of the knowledge and training they had obtained in music, Noh, and allied arts [...]. This they performed themselves in addition to ritual ceremonies and dances, and soon villagers began to participate in the performance." (INOUE; KAWATAKE, 1981, p. 75).

<sup>13</sup> I suggest the reading of MACDONALD (1974, p. 41), for whom Yeats's use of the Noh reveal "a more intense and immediate complexity of emotion." DONOGHUE (1971, p. 103) believes his work gains in power of concentration for it discloses both internal and external conflicts. GASSNER (1954, p. 230) is sure he "set out to represent 'soul' states rather than people on the stage." KYM (19-- , p. 195) thinks the Yeatsian Noh produces deep "inward emotion through the coordinated measures of tempo and silence." STYAN (1983, p. 62) asserts that "The limited life of the play, simple in form and style, could evoke the rich imagined life behind it." Helen VENDLER (1969, p. 140, 203), on the other hand, states the Noh plays encouraged Yeats "in his dislike for the realist potpourri of the English stage" and relieved him of "the obligation to write conventional plays." For complete notes see Bibliographical References.

<sup>14</sup> I suggest the reading of FRIEDMAN, B. *On Baile's Strand to At the Hawk's Well*: staging the depths of the mind; KIM, Myung. *Dance and rhythm: their meaning in Yeats and Noh*; MCDONALD, Keiko. **In search of the orient**: W. B. Yeats and Japanese tradition; TSUKIMURA, Reiko. *A comparison of Yeats's At the Hawk's Well and its Noh version, Taka no Izumi*; and VOGT, Kathleen. *Counter-*



components in Yeats's *At the Hawk's Well*, among others. For complete notes see Bibliographical References.

<sup>15</sup> It is interesting to observe that, besides answering his personal 'call,' the little boy consciously intends to take part in the history of his people, and of his nation. If shamanic initiation is closely related to personal experience, in this case his personal experience is enriched by a strong feeling of responsibility towards his fellowmen, that which characterizes the attitude of an authentic hero. Actually, Cuchulain is not worried with his own life ["it is little I would care, if my life were to last one day and one night only, so long as my name and the story of what I had done would live after me," (GREGORY, 1979, p. 28)] but with everlasting values which rescue the spiritual life of man.

<sup>16</sup> Observe that Cuchulain's epithet is that of an animal. This totemic identification has its roots in ancient tradition, which might even precede shamanism. In the saga of his early boyhood, it is said he acquires this nickname after having fought against a fierce hound that protected the entrance of Culain's (the smith's) district. Setanta (Cuchulain's name up to that moment), a seven year-old-boy, was the only one who was able to beat the animal. After that, he was named Cuchulain, an epithet that means "the Hound of Culain."

According to RUTHERFORD (1986, p. 38), "As a measure of the fundamental change which has taken place in him — his 'rebirth' — the neophyte shaman will often change his name."

<sup>17</sup> For complete notes see Bibliographical References.

## 2 AT THE HAWK'S WELL: the conflict of the warring orders

*Among all things that fly  
the mind is swiftest.  
Rg-Veda*

**At the Hawk's Well**, completed early in 1916, is Yeats's first attempt at the Noh. Yeats used Lady Gregory's **Cuchulain of Muirthemne** as the main source for his plays; he naturally adapted the stories to create not only a heroic but also a supernatural mood. The small episode on which he is supposed to have based **At the Hawk's Well** can be found in "The courting of Emer," which narrates his battle with Aoife and the consequent begetting of a son. Their meeting runs as follows,

So then Cuchulain and Aoife attacked one another and began a fierce fight, and she broke Cuchulain's spear in pieces, and his sword she broke off at the hilt. Then Cuchulain called out, 'Look, the chariot and the horses and the driver of Aoife are fallen down into the valley and are lost!' At that Aoife looked about her, and Cuchulain took a sudden hold of her, and lifted her on his shoulders, and brought her down to where the army was, and laid her on the ground, and she begged for her life, and he gave it to her. And after that she made peace with Scathach, and bound herself by sureties not to go out against her again. And she gave her love to Cuchulain; and out of that love great sorrow came afterwards. (GREGORY, 1979, p. 46-47).

In the play, however, the story is greatly changed. Cuchulain journeys into a distant land to seek the waters of immortality. The desolate site is defended by the Guardian of the Well, a hawk-like woman. An old man, who has spent fifty years trying to drink from the waters, advises Cuchulain that if he looks into the woman's

eyes, a terrible curse will fall upon him. The proud young man stares at her and, hypnotized, is taken far from the well, which bubbles. A clamour of battle is heard, and Cuchulain leaves the spot to fight Aoife, the warrior queen who will become the mother of his only son.

Briefly recounted, the plot seems to be quite simple. Nevertheless, poetic language, some Noh techniques and the use of interwoven symbols which suggest an initiatory ordeal, make of **At the Hawk's Well** one of the most striking works by the poet.

Remoteness in time (the story takes place during the Irish Heroic Age), economy of props (the stage is bare), the use of masks, the presence of three Musicians with their musical instruments and the folding and unfolding of the cloth are elements undoubtedly linked to the Noh tradition. Yeats, however, makes particular use of them reinforcing the symbolic connotation of each one.

The playwright seems to have preferred the distance and indefiniteness of the Irish Heroic Age to free the audience's mind from everyday reality and report to the Ulster cycle, a time in which, according to Myles DILLON, apud ZWERDLING (1965, p. 55), 'Magic is still potent, and gods interfere in the affairs of men.' Besides that, that was a time in which

the feeling for correspondences — for one thing corresponding to another — expressed itself in Celtic religion; an intuition which was with humanity from shamanic days. The whole world was interlinked and interrelated, a concept which is at the root of Buddhist thought too. [...] The Celts had inherited from the Stone Age a sense of identity with all life in both its material and transcendent nature. [...] This is the key to the Celtic Mysteries — the merging of the spiritual, physical and imaginative planes. The later Christian insistence on a duality between light and darkness, between body and soul, between this reality and other numerous possibilities in time and space, was unknown to the Celts. (BANCROFT, 1987, p. 92).

Anne Bancroft touches upon the crucial matter of Celtic cosmovision and the feeling of *interrelatedness*, which is at the root of both shamanism as well as Buddhism and is the philosophy that underlies the Japanese Noh. In his works, Yeats depicts the life of a hero of Celtic lineage who, by all means, is not an ascetic. Nevertheless, as appropriately stated by Alex ZWERDLING (1965, p. 55),

the Irish hero was not worldly at the expense of a spiritual life, and it is precisely his combination of worldliness with the capacity for visionary experience which must have pleased Yeats. [...] Christianity, which stresses the Augustinian separation between worldliness and vision, could not provide Yeats with the kind of world view for which he longed, one which held both of these seemingly opposite attributes in a harmonious balance. In Yeats's works, as in the Irish myths on which he drew, Cuchulain could seek both worldly renown and the kind of spiritual insight which he strives for in Yeats's play **At the Hawk's Well** without apparent contradiction.

The first scene takes place in a bare space. The Musicians enter and slowly unfold the black cloth in a ceremony that “demarks the magical space of the acting area and sets the ritual pattern of action which is to follow.” (PARKIN, 19--, p. 146).

The stage directions say that

*the stretched cloth and the wall make a triangle with the First Musician at the apex supporting the centre of the cloth. On the black cloth is a gold pattern suggesting a hawk.* (HW, p. 208).<sup>1</sup>

The esoteric significance of the triangular geometric design cannot be denied; “symbolic of the triadic nature of creation and the union of astral, mental and physical levels, the Triangle represents evocation.” (DRURY, 1987, p. 39). Everything seems to be pointing at a ritual ceremony: the triangle, the colour black indicative of mystery, the Musicians' rhythmic movement of the arms, the First Musician's motionlessness. The gold pattern suggesting a hawk is also an important ritualistic element that undoubtedly stands for the talisman which, “placed in the centre of the Triangle

incorporates the seal, or sign of the spirit and provides the focus of the ritual. [...] Golden in colour, it is a symbol of aspiration to the divine.” (DRURY, 1987, p. 40, 43).

All the constituents of ritual being asserted on the bare stage, the Musicians start singing a song that has the power to evoke the spot in which the events will take place,

I call to the eye of the mind  
A well long choked up and dry  
And boughs long stripped by the wind,  
And I call to the mind's eye  
Pallor of an ivory face,  
Its lofty dissolute air,  
A man climbing up to a place  
The salt sea wind has swept bare.  
(HW, p. 208).

The song comprises the theme and guiding image of the play; the barrenness of the landscape associated with the man's climbing up recall an initiatory scenario with all its difficulties.

A rethorical question is then proposed,

What were his life soon done!  
Would he lose by that or win?  
(HW, p. 208).

Actually, this question is going to pervade all the five plays from **At the Hawk's Well** to **The Death of Cuchulain** in order to make the audience aware that every gain implies a loss. Yeats truly believed in the strife and consequent balance of opposites. He heavily based his work<sup>2</sup> on HERAKLEITOS' affirmation (*apud* BURNET, 1975, p. 136) that “War is the father of all and the king of all; [...] men do not know how what is at variance agrees with itself. It is an attunement of opposite tensions, like that

of the bow and the lyre.” The song goes on, now with the theme of a useless life, a life wasted without heroism.

By this time, the Guardian of the Well, covered by a black cloak, has entered and is crouching beside the square cloth which represents a well. The Musicians have taken their instruments and prepare themselves to accompany the players’ movements with gong or drum or zither. Reg SKENE (1974, p. 127) calls them “poet-priests of the bardic tradition. By their opening song they evoke ‘A Druid land, a Druid tune’! The subtle monotony of their music should produce in their hearers a state akin to that between sleeping and waking, a state wherein vision may take place.”

Through words they evoke the mind’s eye, a clear suggestion of a trance state, which can also be induced by their drumming. As ELIADE (1989, p. 173) states, “the drumming at the beginning of a séance [...] constitutes the preliminaries for the ecstatic journey.” This idea can be confirmed by RUTHERFORD (1986, p. 49), who is categorical, “the drum is a vehicle by which the shaman makes his journey to the Other Worlds and is spoken of either as ‘shaman’s horse’ or, if he has to cross the waters, his ‘boat’.”

Another important symbolism of the drum is that it “depicts a microcosm with its three zones — sky, earth, underworld — at the same time that it indicates the means by which the shaman accomplishes the break-through from plane to plane and establishes communication with the world above and the world below.” (ELIADE, 1989, p. 173). In **At the Hawk’s Well**, the connection between the three zones is clear. They are represented through the main symbols: the sun, the drum itself (sky);

the trees which stand for the Cosmic Tree (earth); the water which springs from inner earth (underworld).

The powerful images Yeats employs recall the initiatory setting,

The boughs of the hazel shake,  
The sun goes down in the west.

.....

Night falls;  
The mountain-side grows dark

.....

I am afraid of this place.

(HW , p. 209).

Once more, the atmosphere suggested is that of mystery; the sun goes down, night falls, the colours change; everything seems to prepare the enactment of a contact with other spheres, with the otherworld. According to Anne BANCROFT (1987, p. 94), “an essential aspect of the Otherworld was the subtle, nebulous area of intermingling of two worlds — dawn or twilight, [...] sea-mist [...]. The merging boundaries between contrasting periods of time [...] were felt to be haunted by unseen powers. [...] And the divisions themselves were moments in which time was transcended and the unseen world believed to be very close.”

When the Musicians first refer to the Guardian of the Well, who is sitting at its side watching over it, they are touching upon a relevant aspect of the Celtic culture. As it is known, “water was the focal point of the Celtic spiritual life. Christianity ousted many of the ‘pagan’ cults of Europe, but the worship of water continued. The sacred wells became ‘holy’ wells, and the goddesses who had presided over them became nymphs and guardians of wells, or saints to whom the wells were dedicated.” (BANCROFT, 1987, p. 97). The use of the Guardian of the Well, a character that

does not exist in the original saga, shows Yeats's awareness of their history and his great interest in keeping alive the folklore and rich imagination of the Irish people.

Then the First Musician speaks, giving the audience a profile of the Old Man, who has spent fifty years of his life by the well. He is doubled up with age and shivers with cold, denoting he has no mystical heat, a quality generally "connected with access to a certain ecstatic state." (ELIADE, 1989, p. 335). The old hermit has been driven crazy to live in such a desolate landscape, for he speaks and gets no answer. For fifty years, he has been looking forward to an answer but his extreme passivity has turned his quest into mere postponement, and prevented his illumination. He is the man in whose heart nothing thrives, for he has chosen an ascetic life among broken rocks, and has not dared look into the hawkwoman's eyes.

When the young visitor arrives, the Old Man asks,

Who comes so suddenly into this place  
Where nothing thrives? If I may judge by the gold  
On head and feet and glittering in your coat,  
You are not of those who hate the living world.  
(HW, p. 211).

Living in isolation, he has forgotten that young men do enjoy the living world, a fact that does not make them unfit for undergoing a hard trial. The lad's worldliness is emphasized; nevertheless, even though the Irish heroes generally "fight not for heavenly rewards but for earthly immortality and worldly renown," (ZWERDLING, 1965, p. 55) it must not be forgotten that theirs is "the tradition of interpenetration — of deity, man and earth seen as one — the three-in-one [...]. The feeling for the earth penetrated by divine forces, and the intermingling expressed in every leaf and stone."



(BANCROFT, 1987, p. 107).<sup>3</sup> The triadic nature of things is their real essence and men's perception and ultimate aim must be becoming truly attuned to that underlying existence. Therefore, the Young Man's coping with realities which are apparently opposite reveal a fine understanding of life and the great tenacity with which he might pursue his personal quest up to the end.

When asked what has brought him to the hills, the Young Man replies,

A rumour has led me.  
A story told over the wine towards dawn.  
I rose from table, found a boat, spread sail,  
And with a lucky wind under the sail  
Crossed waves that have seemed charmed, and found this shore.  
(HW, p. 212).

He heard the story towards dawn, the mysterious boundary line which separates night from day and in which supernatural forces exercise their power over man's fancy. Then, he found a boat — a vessel symbolic of the passage from one state of being into another<sup>4</sup> — and, helped by a lucky wind (which, as well as the boat, can substitute for the shamanic horse, responsible for the shaman's magical flight) (RUTHERFORD, 1986, p. 141), crossed charmed waves and got to the shore.

After having 'trod the rocks for half a day,' he arrives at the mountainous spot in which three hazels drop their leaves. The symbolism of the Tree of Life, which connects the three cosmic regions since "its branches touch the sky and its roots go down to the underworld," (ELIADE, 1989, p. 270) is already known. And once more the number three (three hazels) seems to stand for that cosmic triad.

Up to this moment, the Young Man's crossing of the ocean and arrival at the barbarous spot do confirm an initiatory ordeal with shamanic characteristics. As Anne

BANCROFT (1987, p. 29) states, “central to shamanic mythology as practiced today is the belief in a Centre of the World around which all space and matter revolves. This Centre is thought to be present in a sacred tree, mountain or pillar, which gives the shaman the ascension necessary for his flight. Nowadays it is usually a tree, but Ice Age societies might well have used a rock as a sacred pillar.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, the tree which “in all its splendour is at once the axis of the cosmos and the source of ever-renewing life” (BLACKER, 1980, p. 26) is a fundamental aspect of the shaman’s cosmovision.<sup>6</sup>

In **At the Hawk’s Well**, however, the hazels (the shaman’s favourite trees)<sup>7</sup> are not in their gorgeousness: the leaves are withered, the nuts dropped; the salt sea wind has stripped them bare. The imagery employed is remindful of autumn, a season which precedes the irrevocable death (and consequent regeneration) caused by the winter which follows; that confirms the theme of the search for renewal. Besides that, the solitary struggle against the powers of nature is a requisite of the shamanic ordeal. As KALWEIT (1992, p. 129-130) would say, when the novice is aware of his weakness and helplessness, when he becomes modest and humble his spirit is able to merge into these powerful forces. The awareness of the mystical unity of nature constitutes an essential experience during the initiation process. Exposed to the wild animals and the elements, deprived of dreams and food, his thoughts permanently attuned to the spirits and the sacred, the future shaman feels to be at one with the world, the universe, nature and the plants. Living the experience of a transpersonal being is his reward.

The young lad asseverates he has come to drink from the well for

He who drinks, they say,  
Of that miraculous water lives for ever.  
(HW, p. 212).

He believes the elixir so eagerly desired is supranatural; he seems to realize that “water was above all an Otherworld element, fluid, mysterious, clear and unclear, both master and servant, for no man could hold it back yet it lapped at men’s feet [...] and the Celts worshipped it as a source of fertility, both material and spiritual.” (BANCROFT, 1987, p. 97). At the impossibility of finding that which he has been looking for, he comments,

But there is no well.

OLD MAN - Can you see nothing yonder?

YOUNG MAN - I but see  
A hollow among stones half-full of leaves.

OLD MAN - And do you think so great a gift is found  
By no more toil than spreading out a sail,  
And climbing a steep hill?  
(HW, p. 212).

The Old Man’s asking if he cannot see anything ‘yonder’ hints at the existence of something beyond mere surface reality, a supernatural world inhabited by ‘holy shades,’ something which he himself is not able to grasp. He remarks that just climbing an abrupt hill is not enough to find ‘so great a gift.’ He believes that waiting passively is part of the great trial, and fails to recognize that the struggle itself, the straight and unconditional facing of one’s destiny (be it gift or curse) is perhaps a faster means to achieve enlightenment. After his inquisitory remarks he exhorts the Young Man to leave the accursed place.

Cuchulain answers,

My luck is strong,  
It will not leave me waiting, nor will they  
That dance among the stones put me asleep;  
If I go drowsy I can pierce my foot.  
(HW, p. 214).

His purpose is to resist the enchantments of the ritual dance which induces to a trance-like state. As they hear the sudden cry of a hawk, he says,

As I came hither,  
A great hawk swept down out of the sky,  
And though I have good hawks, the best in the world  
I had fancied, I have not seen its like. It flew  
As though it would have torn me with its beak,  
Or blinded me, smiting with that great wing.  
(HW, p. 214).

Little by little, Cuchulain's identification with the hawk, his totem-animal, takes place. Familiar with the art of falconry, the attack he suffers increases his strong desire to subdue and possess the hawk-like opponent. The bird's assault recalls a step within shamanic initiatory ordeals, that of dismemberment.<sup>8</sup> "When the spirits manifest themselves in animal form, the aspirant is believed to give them his own flesh to eat." (ELIADE, 1989, p. 108). But Cuchulain goes against this principle and instead challenges the bird and chases it among the rocks.

Dismemberment is generally credited with renewal of the organs. The great wings' attempt to pierce Cuchulain's eyes might stand for a renewal of sight, the power to see with mystical eyes<sup>9</sup>, that which brings the shaman into communion with cosmic life.

The Old Man recognizes the great hawk to be the shape-shifting Woman of the Sidhe, whose glassy eyes make a curse fall on those who stare fixedly at them. He says,

That curse may be  
Never to win a woman's love and keep it;  
Or always to mix hatred in the love;  
Or it may be that she will kill your children  
That you will find them, their throats torn and bloody,  
Or you will be so maddened that you kill them  
With your own hand.  
(HW, p. 215).

His prophetic words will be confirmed later in the development of the five Cuchulain plays. In **On Baile's Strand**, the most terrible curse will take place and Cuchulain will be led to seal his destiny in a tragic way.

The Old Man incisively admonishes the Young Man to leave the place. For the second time, the Guardian of the Well gives a hawk cry. When Cuchulain wonders why she cries out in that way, his companion explains,

It was her mouth, and yet not she, that cried.  
It was that shadow cried behind her mouth;  
.....  
Look at her shivering now, the terrible life  
Is slipping through her veins. She is possessed.  
.....  
The water will have come and gone again;  
That shivering is the sign. O, get you gone,  
At any moment now I shall hear it bubble.  
(HW, p. 215-216).

The old hermit realizes that the shivering leads the Guardian to a trance state and eventual possession by the hawk, which “symbolizes a real and direct connection with the beyond.” (ELIADE, 1989, p. 93-94). Afraid of her supernatural powers, the

old fellow refrains from looking into her eyes and covers his head; the daring Young Man, on the other hand, stares at her.

Under her cloak the Guardian of the Well is wearing a dress that suggests a hawk. Among the innumerable clues which hint at the existence of a shamanic initiatory pattern, that of the girl's wearing an ornithological costume is most relevant; we must have in mind that

the relations between the shaman (and, indeed, 'primitive man' in general) and animals are spiritual in nature and of a mystical intensity that a modern, desacralized mentality finds it difficult to imagine. For primitive man, donning the skin of an animal was becoming that animal, feeling himself transformed into an animal. [...] We have reason to believe that this magical transformation resulted in a 'going out of the self' that very often found expression in an ecstatic experience. (ELIADE, 1989, p. 459).

Cuchulain understands he wants to grow immortal like the Hawk-Woman herself and goes to the side of the well, where he sits to wait for the miraculous water. The Guardian of the Well begins a dance in which she develops "a mystical imitation of animal behavior," (ELIADE, 1989, p. 385) moving like a hawk. "Imitating the gait of an animal or putting on its skin was acquiring a superhuman mode of being. [...] He who, forgetting the limitations and false measurements of humanity, could rightly imitate the behavior of animals — their gait, breathing, cries, and so on — found a new dimension of life: spontaneity, freedom, 'sympathy' with all the cosmic rhythms and, hence, bliss and immortality." (ELIADE, 1989, p. 460). The desire to share her immortality overtly possesses Cuchulain; while the Old Man sleeps, he watches her hawklike dance. Then he rises slowly and the First Musician comments that madness has laid hold upon the Young Man for he grows pale and staggers to his feet.

Hypnotized by the Guardian's terrible power, Cuchulain is finally brought to a trance state. As if in a dream, he is lured away from the miraculous water, which bubbles up and glitters. In his frenzy, he follows the hawk-woman in her ascensional flight, a fact that stands for his own flight towards self-transformation. He has apparently forgotten the water that would bring him immortality; his personal Grail, however, is not water; it is his own self which he must conquer and master; it is his own heart, the site for true evolution and where the real alchemical transformation takes place.

The Old Man awakes to find he has been deluded once more. The Young man tells him the hawk has fled. Then they hear some cries and the noise of battle from Aoife, the warrior queen and her army. Actually, the episode which originated **At the Hawk's Well** is the battle between Cuchulain and Aoife, which is not recounted in the play. Cuchulain, no longer as if in a dream, makes an exit to face the intrepid fighters.

After Cuchulain's departure, the Musicians stand up and resume the symbolic folding and unfolding of the cloth, while they sing,

Folly alone I cherish,  
I choose it for my share;  
Being but a mouthful of air,  
I am content to perish;  
I am but a mouthful of air.  
(HW, p. 219).

The Young Man's soul, being 'but a mouthful of sweet air,' is content not to inhabit a deathless body. Cuchulain cherishes folly and chooses to live a pleasant life; however, with "lighthearted acceptance of life and death" (SKENE, 1974, p. 144) and

tragic exultation, he does not reject the only and terrible means of eternal regeneration: strife. “The ‘strife of opposites’ is really an ‘attunement.’ From this it follows that wisdom is not a knowledge of many things, but the perception of the underlying unity of the warring opposites.” (BURNET, 1975, p. 143). Cuchulain engages in the conflict of the warring orders, being not afraid to embrace his destiny with courage and honour. He has made an heroic choice; actually,

He has lost what may not be found  
Till men heap his burial-mound  
And all history ends.  
(HW, p. 217).

Most certainly, life itself will provide him with the evolutionary experience he looks for. In his burial-mound he will eventually engage in the Great Wheel and his soul — in the form of a bird — will finally achieve immortality.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> YEATS, William B. **At the Hawk's Well**. In: \_\_\_\_\_. **The collected plays of W. B. Yeats**. p. 205-220.

All references from the play will be taken from this edition, hereafter cited in parenthesis as **HW**, followed by indication concerning page number.

<sup>2</sup> While discussing Concord and Discord, Love and War, YEATS (1977, p. 67) acknowledges the influence of Herakleitos.

<sup>3</sup> To be observed is that *interrelation* is a principle not exclusively shamanic or Celtic. The metaphysical poets, who strongly influenced Yeats, shared the same viewpoint, notably William BLAKE who, in **Auguries of Innocence**, wrote

To see a world in a grain of sand,  
And a heaven in a wild flower:  
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,  
And eternity in an hour.

<sup>4</sup> "The practice of exposing the dead in boats might well be explained by vague recollections of ancestral migrations; the boat would carry the dead man's soul back to the original homeland from which the ancestors set forth. But [...] these possible memories lost their historical meaning; the 'original homeland' became a mythical country and the ocean that separates it from inhabited lands was assimilated to the Waters of Death." (ELIADE, 1989, p. 356).

I dare say that the Young Man, dead to his previous form of life, has crossed the Waters of Death to find the mythical country of the Waters of Life.

Expanding his analysis about magico-religious practices related to the use (real or symbolic) of a ritual boat, ELIADE (1989, p. 356) points up two important categories, that of "the boat in which the Indonesian shaman 'travels through the air' in search of the patient's soul; [and that of] the 'boat of spirits,' which carries the souls of the dead to the beyond."

The Young Man travels to the 'beyond' to search for his own soul; he wants to awake to real life and attain the elixir which will grant him immortality.

<sup>5</sup> I shall come back to the motif of the sacred pillar in **The Death of Cuchulain**, in which the hero chooses to die on his feet fastened to a pillar-stone.

<sup>6</sup> It might be interesting to observe that the cosmos in Japan has “no evidence of the wondrous giant Tree at the centre of the world. [...] In the place of the Tree, however, we shall find an almost equally splendid Mountain.” (BLACKER, 1980, p. 27). Perhaps the reason why Yeats has chosen to set the ‘barbarous spot’ upon a hill is that it conforms to the Japanese cosmovision, which is at the root of the Noh theatre. Thus, the symbols he uses are coherent with the Noh tradition as well as with the Western worldview.

<sup>7</sup> While discussing the use of the drum as a means of trance induction, RUTHERFORD (1986, p. 52) affirms that it is “the ancestor both of the traditional magician’s wand as well as the hazel-fork of the dowser or water-diviner. The traditional woods of the latter are willow, because of its connections with water, rowan and, specially, hazel, which were also those favoured by shamans.”

<sup>8</sup> In shamanic ordeals, “both spontaneous vocation and the quest for initiation involve either a mysterious illness or a more or less symbolic ritual of mystical death, sometimes suggested by a dismemberment of the body and renewal of the organs.” (ELIADE, 1989, p. 53).

<sup>9</sup> Mircea ELIADE (1989, p. 42) relates the initiatory dream of a Samoyed shaman who, while in apprenticeship, had his body ritually dismembered. His bones were fished out of a river by a blacksmith, who “forged his head and taught him how to read the letters that are inside it. He changed his eyes; and that is why, when he shamanizes, he does not see with his bodily eyes but with these mystical eyes. He pierced his ears, making him able to understand the language of plants.”

### 3 THE GREEN HELMET: transcending the human condition

*For the wisdom of men grows  
according to what is before them.  
Empedokles*

**The Golden Helmet**, written in 1908, is the prose version which was later republished in verse form under the title **The Green Helmet**. The subject of the play comes from tales which belong to the Ulster Cycle. Lady Gregory compiled these sagas in her already mentioned and fascinating book **Cuchulain of Muirthemne**. “Bricriu’s Feast, and the War of Words of the Women of Ulster” and “The Championship of Ulster” are the main sources in which Yeats found the basis for **The Green Helmet**.

In the first legend, Bricriu of the Bitter Tongue (also called Poisontongue or Bricriu of the Poisonous Tongue because of his great skill at creating discord) holds a banquet for king Conchubar and the most prominent heroes of Ulster. In those days, at great Celtic festivals, it was a custom to award the so-called Champion’s Portion to the foremost hero. Bricriu’s hidden intention is to disseminate strife; therefore, he separately allures Conall, Laegaire and Cuchulain by saying that each of them deserves the Champion’s Portion.<sup>1</sup>

All the heroes have their own charioteers who, in an attempt to defend their masters' right to the portion, start a big fight in which "the one half of the hall was as if on fire with the clashing of swords and spears, and the other half white as chalk with the whiteness of the shields." (GREGORY, 1979, p. 56). Conchubar and Fergus manage to stop the dispute but the women start a war of words in which they display the qualities of their husbands. The tale ends without a final conclusion about who would deserve the Champion's Portion. The resolution comes only in the second tale, "The Championship of Ulster," which narrates the trials undergone by the young heroes to conquer the most important award of Ireland.

According to the second story, the young warriors are sent to Curoi (the Druid) for a right judgement. They are put to hard probation and only Cuchulain is able to master the enchanted monsters with the shape of cats and to cut up the terrifying witches of the valley. Besides, he subjugates Ercol (Maeve's foster-father) and wins some other games. Even after such daring deeds, Conall and Laegaire are not convinced of Cuchulain's superiority; they go back to Emain to wait for Curoi's decision. Then Uath, the Stranger, appears to test them once more; he solemnly states, "The thing I want is the thing I cannot find, [...] and that is a man that will keep his word and will hold to his agreement with me." (GREGORY, 1979, p. 74).<sup>2</sup> After that, he proposes to have his head cut off by a hero who, the next day, would allow him to have his own head in return. Laegaire is the first to make the agreement and is

followed by Conall. Both strike the giant's head; nevertheless, their courage fails them and they try to escape from being struck; neither is able to keep his promise and they break the word given to the stranger.

On the other hand, Cuchulain, without any previous agreement, gives Uath a definite blow with the axe. The stroke is so violent that the churl's head is thrown "to the top half of the hall, so that the whole house shook." (GREGORY, 1979, p. 75). The next day, the brave warrior offers his neck to the giant's shining blade. When the axe comes down, it strikes the floor instead of his head. Then, Uath reveals his true identity — he is Curoi who, disguised, tried the heroes through his enchantments. He eventually honours Cuchulain with the Championship of the heroes of Ireland and the Champion's Portion, putting an end to the quarrel about the greatest contest of Ulster.

Yeats condenses both sagas into one. With great wit and fine humour he compiles the mythemic fragments and overtly stresses the farcical elements, "although otherwise he seemed mostly to prefer tragedy." (BJERSBY, 1950, p. 33). The subtitle of the play, 'An Heroic Farce,' puzzles the reader from the very beginning, throwing him into a world of antinomies and philosophical questionings.

Trying to deal with these questions while analysing **The Green Helmet**, one is easily reminded of the Grail saga<sup>3</sup> as well as of most traditional legends, whose symbolical images express a fantastic world which requires meditation to be

interpreted satisfactorily. The images or situations that seem to be incoherent on the surface certainly reveal an unsuspected and latent deeper level that will be apprehended in due time. Therefore, it is the most fantastic, less evident or less coherent aspect, the one which seems not to have historical value, which offers us some help to apprehend the central element that gives the legend (or series of compositions round the same theme) its true or deeper meaning. According to the Emperor JULIANUS, *apud* ÉVOLA (1988, p. 11), in the myths, that which bears no apparent verisimilitude is exactly that which opens up the way to truth. In fact, the more paradoxical the enigma is, the more it seems to admonish us not to trust the plain word, but to make an effort round the occult truth. With the purpose of finding out the hidden meanings of the play, there follows a study which is an attempt at revealing its symbolic contents.

**The Green Helmet** fuses both legends; therefore, the Red Man embodies the qualities inherent to Bricriu as well as those belonging to Uath, the Stranger. The story opens up with a dialogue between Conall and Laegaire, who are waiting for the Red Man to come out of the sea<sup>4</sup> to ask for their heads. One year before, he had proposed them a deal: he would allow them to whip his head off if they, in return, allowed him to do the same. Both merrily accepted the sport thinking the gigantic figure would die if he were beheaded. Surprisingly, however, after being struck he

took his laughing head from the ground and splashed into the sea, promising them to come back in a year's time.

While both heroes are waiting for the giant<sup>5</sup> to reappear, Cuchulain arrives and they tell him the strange tale. When the Red Man finally comes up, Cuchulain is prepared to face him. The startling fellow says that, on his part, it has been only a joke, and putting the Green Helmet<sup>6</sup> on the floor, urges the bravest to pick it up. He leaves the place; nevertheless, the seed of a new altercation is sown; as the result of his plot, each of the three heroes believes he has a right to win the dispute. Cuchulain tries to find a solution and proposes the sharing of the prize by means of symbolically drinking from it; he says,

It has been given to none: that our rivalry might cease,  
We have turned that murderous cat into a cup of peace.  
I drank the first; and then Conall; give it to Laegaire now  
(GH, p. 236).<sup>7</sup>

He takes the Green Helmet<sup>8</sup>, a receptacle which certainly evokes the *abundance vases* from different traditions<sup>9</sup> (in the Occident, the most famous exemplar of it is the Grail). They have a *central* significance. The beverage is equivalent to the drink of immortality; it symbolizes knowledge while the cup is the deposit of traditional knowledge so that it can be transmitted through the ages. The drink is absorbed by the body; knowledge is intellectually assimilated. (GUÉNON, 1990, p. 149). Cuchulain drinks first and, without meaning it, arouses dispute once more.

While the heroes are having an argument, the Red Man reappears and now asks for a poll. In his holistic view<sup>10</sup>, Cuchulain realizes his attitudes might affect society as a whole. Similarly to the great initiands in all traditions, as well as in shamanism, he is aware of the invisible emanations and the fitting together of every single act. His perception shows him the interdependence of the universe in all its parts, and his

effort is directed towards ensuring that every endeavour is brought into alignment with the Cosmos. It is for precisely this reason that he is consulted before all major undertakings. [...] The shaman must, therefore, be the utterer of warnings against the breaking of ritual taboos [...]. Where his warnings against taboo-breaking could not be delivered, were ignored or [...] disbelieved, he must do the next best thing and seek to minimize the damage caused in order to save his fellows from the disasters pursuant on their inadvertent or wanton acts. In any case, even without human assistance, the cosmic equilibrium is always in danger of disturbance. For the shaman, [...] the vital and perhaps most vital task is that of its maintenance. One can see why the sacrifice of a single human life should be regarded as a small price to pay — even by the victim itself. (RUTHERFORD, 1986, p. 73 - 74).

Cuchulain is strongly against taboo-breaking; he realizes that the word given to the Red Man should not be broken. Having this single perception in mind and thinking his sacrifice might rescue the cosmic order, he recognizes the guest's right to a head and, showing selfless heroism and great sense of justice, kneels down before him and offers his own neck<sup>11</sup> by saying,

Quick to your work, old Radish, you will fade when the cocks have crowed.  
(GH, p. 243).

However, instead of being decapitated, Cuchulain is rewarded with the Green Helmet, a fact which confirms that “successfully undergoing the initiatory ordeal in itself makes the ‘danger’ disappear.” (ELIADE, 1989, p. 484 - 485).



After this brief summary of the content of the play, there follows an investigation into the several differences between the legend and play. Among the numberless variations, there is one that at first sight seems to be rather unimportant but it turns out to be very significant — it is the length of time Yeats's characters have to reflect upon the word given. In the original saga, the churl promises to come back the following day; in the play, a whole year has passed by when he splashes out of the sea to ask for his bargain. If the system Yeats develops in **A Vision** is taken into consideration, one might say the diagram which corresponds to the interregnum both warriors have in the play is a spiral and not a straight line. Straight lines stand for a mere advance in time while the spiral also includes self-growing and real development. Not only the short period of one day but the complete cycle of one year is the interlude for the heroes to mature their choice and strengthen their bravery and courage, achieving a state of firmness that is the ultimate balance men strive for. It is time for them to face this last battle with dignity and responsibility. The moment has come for them to take a decision; on this decision will depend their success or their failure,

There is a tide in the affairs of men,  
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;  
Omitted, all the voyage of their life  
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.  
On such a full sea are we now afloat,  
And we must take the current when it serves,  
Or lose our ventures.  
(SHAKESPEARE, 1965, IV, III, l. 217 - 223).

Nevertheless, even after this time for preparation, they fail. Afraid of trying, they miss the right tide; for them, the unadventurous domestic situation is preferable

to being afloat on an unknown sea of challenges and risks. Restricted to shallows and miseries, both Conall and Laegaire, not able to keep their word, prefer shame and an everlasting moral wound to having their necks cut off. Even though a year has passed by and they have had the opportunity to reactualize the mythical passage in which the Red Man challenges their bravery, they seem not to recognize the importance of the moment. Being at the height, both are ready to decline for they see this probatory step as a burden and not as the tide that would lead them to venture or rather back to a sacred condition and total union with the cosmic order. Frightened, these men of little faith doubt. But

Our doubts are traitors  
And make us lose the good we oft might win,  
By fearing to attempt.  
(SHAKESPEARE, 1969, I, IV, l. 77 - 79).

Being aware that their attitude is not something to be proud of, they indulge in cowardice,

LEGAIRE - Cry out that he [Cuchulain] cannot come in.

CONALL - He must look for his dinner elsewhere for no one alive shall stop where a shame must alight on us two before the dawn is up.

LEGAIRE - No man on the ridge of the world must ever know that but us two.  
(GH, p. 225).

Forbidden by Conall and Legaire to enter into the house, the Young Man shows he is brave and even daring for he unmakes the law made by both heroes and pushing past Conall, he enters into the interdicted place. He wins this first game showing great strength and will. Both men recognize him to be Cuchulain; nevertheless, they bid him to go away from that unlucky country. Their belief in

unlucky places positively indicates that the atmosphere they live in is propitious for abstract subjects, things which are not concrete, values which do not concern exclusively the material world. They order Cuchulain to find a luckier house, but finally agree to tell him the tale having confidence that his good fortune will put an end to the troubles they have been cast into.

Differently from both of them, however, Cuchulain does not need one year to get ready for the confrontation. He has just arrived from Scotland and even without having made a deal with the Red Man, he feels that his country would have its integrity seriously injured if there were no man alive able to sustain the word given.

Conall states that the Red Man

called for his debt and his right,  
And said that the land was disgraced because of us two [he and Laegaire] from that night  
If we did not pay him his debt.  
(GH, p. 230).

Actually, all of them seem to be aware that “on the goodwill of these non-human beings, depends the prosperity of the community.” (BLACKER, 1986, p. 21).

Cuchulain tries to fulfill the Red Man’s exigencies and does not enter the pattern of initiation to show his pride as a brave warrior but because he is aware that the word given is the last agreement with superior forces that might try men and even beat them with their supreme power. His ordeal recalls the symbolism of the bridge or paradoxical passage; it sometimes proves to be an impossibility or a situation from which there is no escape. In such a desperate situation he feels

the need to transcend opposites, to abolish the polarity typical of the human condition, in order to attain to ultimate reality. Whoever would transfer from this to the Otherworld, or return, must do so through the undimensioned and timeless 'interval' that divides related but contrary forces, between which, if one is to pass at all, it must be 'instantly.' In the myths the 'paradoxical' passage emphatically testifies that he who succeeds in accomplishing it has transcended the human condition; he [...] proves that he is spirit, is no longer a human being, and at the same time attempts to restore the 'communicability' that existed *in illo tempore* between this world and heaven. (ELIADE, 1989, p. 486).

Cuchulain instantly<sup>12</sup> and heroically takes the decision to undergo the hard probation he is faced with. Even without knowing what might happen he does not avoid the challenge and says,

I am losing patience, Conall — I find you stuffed with pride,  
The flagon full to the brim, the front door standing wide;  
You'd put me off with words, but the whole thing's plain enough,  
You are waiting for some message to bring you to war or love  
In that old secret country beyond the wool-white waves,  
Or it may be down beneath them in foam-bewildered caves  
Where nine forsaken sea-queens fling shuttles to and fro;  
But beyond them, or beneath them, whether you will or no,  
I am going too.  
(GH, p. 227 - 228).

When he affirms to be losing patience, one immediately understands he is being possessed by heat and wrath, which are clear signs of initiation.<sup>13</sup> He gets angry at Conall, who is blinded by pride. As a warrior, Cuchulain is also proud of his deeds, but he condemns Conall's lack of restraint since at that moment there is nothing for him to be proud of. Presumptuousness is a characteristic that does not belong to real initiates; a hero must be courageous and proud of his deeds, but if his pride is excessive (*hybris*), he will certainly be punished.<sup>14</sup> Cuchulain is daring but does not commit the sin of pride; he respects the sacred and the unknown without fearing or mocking at it. His reverence shows he is on the path of initiation.

He shows disposition to undertake the journey either to the old secret country beyond the waves, or even down beneath them in secret caves.<sup>15</sup> Actually, “the monsters of the abyss recur in many traditions. Heroes, initiates descend into the depths to confront marine monsters; this is a typical initiatory ordeal.” (ELIADE, 1959, p. 135). From this moment on, the sojourn in the underworld (a step within several patterns of initiation rituals) is inevitable. The symbolical stay in the sea may be interpreted as the return to the womb or to Chaos. In such a state, the initiand undergoes symbolical death for water “dissolves, abolishes all form. It is just for this reason that it is so rich in germs, so creative.” (ELIADE, 1959, p. 135). After that, he may acquire wisdom and knowledge, becoming a new human being.

Selfless hero *par excellence*, Cuchulain tries to rescue values which seem to be threatened with extinction — bravery, honesty, manhood. He makes the commitment of his countrymen his own, for he sees the Red Man’s axe as a weapon over the whole nation. His attitude is perfectly conscious; therefore, it has the power to redeem not only a nation but all humankind. Cuchulain, as an initiand, proves to have a deep understanding of external occurrences; every single gesture has its dimension amplified by the sharp eyes of a brave man who investigates the secret interrelation of all things in the universe. He despises the shallow illusion of isolation and eagerly dives into the analysis of the hidden connection of facts.<sup>16</sup>

Cuchulain is clearly conscious of his role within the society he lives in and recognizes he must make the right choice, assuming the burden which results from his responsibility as well as from his incomparable sense of justice and honour,

CUCHULAIN - He played and paid his head, and it's right that we pay him back,  
And give him more than he gave, for he comes in as a guest:  
So I will give him my head.  
(GH, p. 242).

ELIADE (1975, p. 92) asserts that "among the Sudanese of the Nuba Mountains, the first initiatory consecration is called 'head,' because the novice's head is opened so that the spirit can enter." The opening of the head, which according to AMBELAIN (1991, p. 42) is the symbol of the Order and the Law, points out the dismemberment pattern which makes part of the initiatory process the novice must undergo.

Being ready to have his poll whipped off shows that Cuchulain is on the path of initiation. He stoically submits to the ordeal and volunteers for the benefit of mankind; besides, his kneeling down also indicates that he is prepared to face individual initiation. As Joseph HENDERSON says *apud* JUNG (1964, p. 131-132), "the novice for initiation is called upon to give up willful ambition and all desire and to submit to the ordeal. He must be willing to experience his trial without hope of success. In fact, he must be prepared to die." The Red Man asserts that Cuchulain is such a person; he is

the laughing lip  
That shall not turn from laughing, whatever rise or fall;  
The heart that grows no bitterer although betrayed by all;  
The hand that loves to scatter; the life like a gambler's throw;  
And these things I make prosper.  
(GH, p. 243).

Cuchulain's disposition to rescue the dignity of his countrymen shows his belief in the "sacrality that unveils the deepest structures of the world. The cosmos appears as a cipher only in the religious perspective." (ELIADE, 1959, p. 150). When the Red Man comes back to ask for the head, he reaffirms the possibility of a straight contact with superior forces. For Cuchulain, keeping the word given to the stranger is an act invested with deep significance since it presupposes "the more or less explicit imitation of the cosmogonic act. For traditional man, the imitation of an archetypal model is a reactualization of the mythical moment when the archetype was revealed for the first time." (ELIADE, 1974, p. 76). This reactualization of the cosmogony coincides with Yeats's views of the poet as saviour. His intention as a writer and as an Irishman was to restore the national identity of his countrymen so as to re-establish the connection between the Irish people and their own native land, driving away the torpor, *ennui* and lifelessness. Yeats believed that the release of creative energy during the ritualistic presentation of the plays would invoke a bigger energy awakening his countrymen from the torpor in which they were entangled and inciting them to fight for their national identity and for an "ideal land where the fury of human passions is united with the spiritual." (BIDERMAN, 1985, p. 85). Within this perspective, Cuchulain accepts the challenge and undertakes the mission of facing the Red Man. His undertaking is that which CAMPBELL (1973, p. 51) designates *the call to adventure*<sup>17</sup>, which "rings up the curtain, always, on a mystery of

transfiguration — a rite, or moment, of spiritual passage, which, when complete, amounts to a dying and a birth. The familiar life horizon has been outgrown; the old concepts, ideals and emotional patterns no longer fit; the time for the passing of a threshold is at hand.”

The physical struggle he is ready to undergo is symbolical of an inner struggle which takes place in his indomitable heart. Actually, Cuchulain’s time to answer for the call has come. He accepts Conall and Laegaire’s deal with the Red Man as his personal quest having in mind that, as a human being, he has a commitment with his contrymen and, therefore, with society as a whole. His ritual sacrifice stands for an exemplary behavior which tries “to restore the primordial unity, that which existed before the Creation.” (ELIADE, 1974, p. 78).

This attempt at re-enactment reveals a pattern of initiation in which both the personal quest and the welfare of society are equally relevant. At the crucial moment of choice, Cuchulain is prepared to keep his word even at the price of his own life. He does not see death as a simple-minded warrior for whom death is the definite end of one’s life; as a matter of fact, his physical or external death would imply in psychic integrity, spiritual life and freedom. He is set free from the ultimate sacrifice, but the symbolical death takes place when he kneels down before the Red Man, offering his neck for the benefit of humankind. He rises from the experience much stronger (both



morally and spiritually) than he was. His mission is well-succeeded and he proves to be ready to face a more difficult challenge within his initiatory ordeal.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The Champion's Portion consists of a piece of meat which is cut before the banquet and reserved for the bravest hero; its value is symbolical but in primitive societies the best men tried to conquer the prize even at the expense of their own lives. Their attitude shows the sacred respect they had for something which was taken as a sign of transcendence. In modern times, however, in a world ruled by blind commercialism, the old values seem to be in total discredit.

Nowadays, the great majority of competitions seem to have lost their glamour; the primordial desire to simply break the human limits and to master physical barriers sharing a superhuman condition has been little by little substituted for the greed for fame and money, a fact that shows the total desacralization of the Cosmos.

<sup>2</sup> From this point on, some parallels with the Grail saga can easily be traced. According to ÉVOLA (1988, p. 35), the Grail is the symbol of that which was lost and must be regained. A man must make the Grail manifest its virtues again, and this man is often the knight who will face the dangerous position. Uath is looking for the brave knight who will keep his word and is prepared to offer his head in the name of honour; therefore, he is looking for such a man who aspires to conquer the Grail.

<sup>3</sup> Most of the texts which refer to the Grail present a little variation round a few essential themes, expressed mainly through the symbolism of the figure of the knights and their deeds. Essentially, it is the theme of a mysterious centre, the search for a trial and a spiritual conquest.

Some Celtic beliefs came to be associated with Arthur and the quest for the Holy Grail. The religious importance of this amalgamation cannot be denied. BANCROFT (1987, p. 179) states that "in the eyes of many it is certainly not just a fairy-tale but represents a secret teaching, a western mystery cult, just as attractive as any of the Greek or Asiatic ones. For the mysteries were institutes erected for the transmutation of base ignorance into precious illumination. The Grail, for instance, in its form as the cup in which drops of Christ's blood were caught at the Crucifixion [...], is the chalice of immortality [...]. Taken as a secret religious teaching, the Arthurian legends embody all the initiatory experiences and symbols of a true mystery cult. [...] the Grail is the heart of man — the alchemical crucible of evolutionary experience, insofar as its great mystery pertains to human dimensions." Cuchulain

tries to conquer his Grail; in other words, through hard probation he tries to achieve his own unity of being.

<sup>4</sup> The legendary history of Ireland narrates the vicissitudes of races which successively occupied the region and dominated it, coming from a mysterious Nordic-Atlantic centre to which they eventually went back. The vicissitudes of these races are innumerable: they are in eternal fight against the Fomors, giants or obscure and monstrous beings, significantly assimilated to the antediluvian giants or to wild beings descendant from Chan and Cain. These Fomors represent the forces of a cycle of the Bronze Age, obscure forces, associated to the depths of the water (in the Ulster cycle). It means they correspond to forces of the original cycle which materialized and degraded in a titanic sense. (ÉVOLA, 1988, p. 26).

The Red Man belongs to the Ulster cycle and is a gigantic figure that partly corresponds to this profile. He is closely associated with the waters for he splashes out of the sea. He comes to defiantly try men in their inner quest; nevertheless, when someone faces up to him with honour and dignity, he softens his daring expression and shares the pleasure of the conquest showing his goodwill and benignity. In this sense, he can also be compared to the Japanese *Kami*, in conformance with the description given by Carmem BLACKER (1986, p. 41), that says, "His nature is ambivalent; it is neither good nor bad, but can manifest itself as benign or destructive to human interests according to the treatment it receives."

<sup>5</sup> The fact of the Red Man being a giant recalls "the symbolism of the 'Center' (Mountain, Pillar, Tree, Giant) [which] is an organic part of the most ancient [...] spirituality." (ELIADE, 1989, p. 268).

<sup>6</sup> The Red Man's height is increased by horns on the Green Helmet. BANCROFT (1987, p. 175) asserts the horned mask "shows the need people continued to have for contact with the supernatural [...] world." Horns are also a symbol of *renovatio* (DEVEREUX, 1993, p. 97); therefore, Cuchulain's quest for the Green Helmet stands for his personal Grail, his ultimate knowledge, wisdom and self-growing.

<sup>7</sup> YEATS, William B. **The Green Helmet**. In: \_\_\_\_\_. **The collected plays of W. B. Yeats**. p. 221-243.

All references from the play will be taken from this edition, hereafter cited in the text in parenthesis as **GH**, followed by indication concerning page number.

<sup>8</sup> Cuchulain's taking the Green Helmet is not a matter of 'fetichism,' the worship of an object in itself and for itself, in a word, 'superstition' — but the sacred respect for a strange object, which does not belong to the familiar universe, which comes from somewhere else and is, therefore, a sign of the beyond, an approximate image of transcendence. The hierophanies, precisely for manifesting the sacred,

change the antological regime of the objects: vile or insignificant, a stone, a tree or a fountain, since the moment they embody the sacred, become inestimable in the eyes of those who participate in this religious experience [...]. The paradox of the hierophany consists in the manifestation of the sacred and the embodiment of the transcendent in a 'worthless object;' in other words, the hierophany effectuates a breakthrough in plane. (ELIADE, 1979, p. 23, 127).

<sup>9</sup> In the tradition of the alchemists, the receptacles of alchemical gold have a specific virtue: they lengthen life infinitely. (ELIADE, 1979, p. 89).

<sup>10</sup> Some authors seem to be rediscovering holism as if it were something new; nevertheless, the concept was already developed in ancient traditions. The idea is rooted in the Indian concept of *Dharma*. Taken by the Buddhists as the Law of Cause and Effect, it says that no act, however trivial, takes place in isolation. Every cause affects the macrocosm; therefore, it not only tends to turn back to the agent, but to others as well.

The Chinese Taoists see the whole universe, including every single human being, as a cortex of energies and rhythms — the Tao — which are in a permanent state of flux. The life-task of the individual is to get synchronized to these, both in himself and in the outside world.

It brings to mind the myth of the 'Eternal Return' as well as the Greek idea of 'Cosmos,' where once more "the universe and everything is perceived as a total unity." (RUTHERFORD, 1986, p. 73).

<sup>11</sup> In several initiatory rites the candidate has to undergo "ordeals of an extremely painful nature, either self-inflicted or inflicted by initiators." He may even suffer dismemberment by the spirits, or he may cut a part of his body, "offering it as a kind of gift in exchange for secret knowledge." This mutilation can be seen as "a form of barter with the spirits [...]. However, even the crisis phase is not universally regarded as necessary or else it may take place symbolically." (RUTHERFORD, 1986, p. 38). Cuchulain undergoes all the initiatory steps of his ordeal and finally accomplishes the ultimate sacrifice at a symbolical level.

<sup>12</sup> It must be pointed out that his method of analysis diverges from that used by Hamlet; differently from the Shakespearean hero, Cuchulain follows the initiatory principle of acting as soon as it is necessary; he is not a 'theoretical philosopher;' for him, deeds are more effective than words.

While describing the qualities inherent to the shamans, STEVENS & STEVENS (1992, p. 22) say that they learn how to be well-succeeded and undoubtedly know how to act when it is necessary. They are not theoretical philosophers. They possess practical abilities to deal with dilemmas and are at ease with the paradox. Cuchulain deals with his paradox and does not postpone his decision. As an initiand, he sees man and every act as part of a unity called human

being. It is this collective identity he tries to recover when he willingly performs the great deed of offering his head to be whipped off.

<sup>13</sup> KALWEIT (1992, p. 125) wonders if the fire is just a symbol of transformation or if besides that it represents a real biochemical process which is felt as an internal heat, similar to the Kundalini energy. ELIADE (1989, p. 335), on his turn, believes that fire and mystical heat “are always connected with access to a certain ecstatic state — and the same connection is observed in the most archaic strata of magic and universal religion. Mastery over fire, insensibility to heat, and, hence, the ‘mystical heat’ [...] is a magico-mystical virtue that, accompanied by no less marvelous qualities (ascent, magical flight, etc.) translates into sensible terms the fact that the shaman has passed beyond the human condition and already shares in the condition of ‘spirits.’” It is ELIADE (1979, p. 132) who also states that it is mainly through the fire that Nature is changed; since archaic stages of culture, it has been used as the transmutation agent. At multiple levels, the fire, the flame, the bright light and the internal heat always express spiritual experiences, the embodiment of the sacred, the proximity of God.

<sup>14</sup> Greek mythology is a rich source of examples of punishment for *hybris*. The invincible heroes who abused of their own power provoked the jealousy of the gods and fell victim of their anger. Prometheus stole the sacred fire from the gods, who then punished him by chaining him to a rock where he was tortured by an eagle. Icarus forged for himself a pair of wings made of wax, because he wanted to soar high in order to reach the sun. Wanting to be equal to the gods he was chastised, since when he approached the sun his wings started to melt and he literally fell down to the earth. Extremely symbolical, these examples show the limits of human nature.

<sup>15</sup> His words are a foreshadowing of what is going to happen in **On Baile’s Strand** when Cuchulain fights the waves.

<sup>16</sup> In a short dialogue with a disciple, the Master shows that the idea of interrelatedness is primordial; its roots are lost in immemorial times. There is a single idea which is the universal matrix; it embodies everything and everything comes from it. Therefore, the apparent disconnection and fragmentation of things is a fallacy. The dialogue is as follows,

THE MASTER - Undoubtedly, you take me as a man that has learnt and kept a lot, right?

ZINGONG - Isn’t that so?

THE MASTER - No. My thought comes from a single idea which comprises everything. (CONFÚCIO, 1983, p. 124).

Like the Master, Cuchulain is aware of the great chain which connects seemingly isolated facts.

<sup>17</sup> *The call to adventure* stands for the moment in which the initiand realizes he must live through an initiatory ordeal. CAMPBELL (1973, p. 58) says that, “This first stage of the mythological journey — which we have designated the ‘call to adventure’ — signifies that destiny has summoned the hero and transferred his spiritual center of gravity from within the pale of this society to a zone unknown. This fateful region of both treasure and danger may be variously represented: as a distant land, a forest, a kingdom under-ground, beneath the waves, or above the sky, a secret island, lofty mountaintop, or profound dream state; but it is always a place of strangely torments, superhuman deeds, and impossible delight. The hero can go forth of his own volition to accomplish the adventure, [...] or he may be carried or sent abroad by some benign or malignant agent.”

#### 4 ON BAILE'S STRAND: the paradoxical passage

*He who does not die before he dies,  
perishes when he dies.*  
Jacob Boehme

“The only son of Aoife,” also found in Lady Gregory’s **Cuchulain of Muirthemne**, is the legend which tells us how Cuchulain killed his only son. According to this tale, when Cuchulain leaves Aoife after having overcome her in battle, he knows they are going to have a child. Before leaving, he gives her a gold ring for her to offer the boy as soon as his thumb fills it.

He goes to Ireland and then takes Emer as his wife. Extremely jealous and in great ire, Aoife’s love turns to hatred and she seeks revenge. She puts their son under the teaching of Scathach, who introduces him to the art of war. When Conlaoch is skilfully prepared to use the arms, his mother sends him to Ireland, but first she puts him under bonds, “the first never to give way to any living person, but to die sooner than be made turn back; the second, not to refuse a challenge from the greatest champion alive, but to fight him at all risks, even if he was sure to lose his life; the third, not to tell his name on any account, though he might be threatened with death for hiding it.” (GREGORY, 1979, p. 237).

The young man sets out and lands at Baile's Strand. When asked about his name, he refuses to tell it. Then Conchubar, the High King, asks a man to "drag the name and the story out of this young man." Conall thinks he would be able to overcome the lad, but he fails. So Cuchulain is called to the strand; he threatens the courageous man, who states, "I will never give in to any man to tell the name, or to give an account of myself. But if I was not held with a command, there is no man in the world I would sooner give it to than to yourself, since I saw your face. But do not think, brave champion of Ireland, that I will let you take away the fame I have won, for nothing." (GREGORY, 1979, p. 238-239). They start a big fight in which neither of them wins. Cuchulain feels great anger and calls for the Gae Bulg, his spear. At that moment, "the flames of the hero-light began to shine about his head, and by that sign Conlaoch knew him to be Cuchulain, his father." Then, he avoids to kill Cuchulain and is mortally wounded by the Gae Bulg. When the Irish hero asks his name, he shows the gold ring and reveals his identity. As he was suffering the pains of death, his father takes his sword and puts it through him, to put an end to the young man's sorrow. "Then, to save the Ulster men from Cuchulain's rage, King Conchubar gives his druids an urgent command to draw their magical circles round Cuchulain, to make him believe for the space of three days that he fights the wild waves of an angry sea." (BJERSBY, 1978, p. 24).

In **Myths and Folk Tales of Ireland**, Jeremiah CURTIN's (1975, p. 228) version is all the more impressive. Cuchulain's spear goes through the boy's head, and he dies of that blow from his father. Then, the parent takes his sword and cuts "the head off him sooner than leave him in the punishment and pain he was in."



After the truth has been revealed Cuchulain feels the weight of his deed in his heart. He is Oedipus in reverse: the father who has killed his son. Being aware of his anxiety, Conchubar bids Cathbad, the Druid, to put an enchantment on the desperate father; instead of fighting against all the men of Ulster, Cuchulain fights the sea for three days and nights (which in Curtin's version mounts up to seven days and nights), and all fellowmen believe he dies in such a terrifying battle.

In **On Baile's Strand**, Yeats adapts the saga to fit his purposes as a poet and dramatist, and also enriches it by adding a secondary or parallel plot, which will be described later. In the play, both Cuchulain and the young man are bound to different oaths; the first has given his word to obey Conchubar, the High King of Ulster, under whatever circumstances; the Young Man, who is not given a name, is under bonds not to tell his name to any person alive. He arrives at the strand with the sole purpose of fighting Cuchulain, without knowing that he is his parent.

Conchubar thinks Ulster must be defended against the invader, and summons Cuchulain to do that. But the brave warrior feels great sympathy for the stranger and respects his courage and noble character when he says,

YOUNG MAN - I will give no other proof than the hawk gives  
That it's no sparrow!

*[He is silent for a moment, then speaks to all].*

Yet look upon me, kings.

I, too, am of that ancient seed, and carry

The signs about this body and in these bones.

CUCHULAIN - To have shown the hawk's grey feather is enough,  
And you speak highly, too.

(BS, p. 265).<sup>1</sup>

Bird imagery will be recurrent in the play. Both men refer to the hawk as a metaphor for their distinction and honour. According to T. H. WHITE, (1969, p. 138), “the Hawk is a bird which is even better equipped in its spirit than in its talons, for it shows very great courage in a small body.” But when the heroes use such a poetical language and invoke the hawk as a sign of nobility, tradition and aristocracy — which conforms to Yeats’s ideals of rescuing the heroic and noble past of Ireland —, they are also making a reference to the strength of their spiritual life. After all, “bird feathers, whose ascensional symbolism requires no stressing,” (ELIADE, 1989, p. 177) also stand for the swift journey of the mind as well as the enjoyment of a ‘spirit’ condition (ELIADE, 1989, p. 481).

Cuchulain also mentions his god-like lineage making clear that he belongs to a special cast of people who possess both human and superhuman qualities,

I have that clean hawk out of the air  
That, as men say, begot this body of mine  
Upon a mortal woman.  
(BS, p. 257).<sup>2</sup>

Actually, his preeminent bloodline makes him fitted for the great tasks a hero or future initiand must undergo. Besides that, the identification with the spirits of animals is characteristic of shamanic power. The connection between human beings and animal world is essential to shamanism, and the shaman uses his knowledge and methods to participate in the power of that world. Michael HARNER (1989, p. 98-99) points out that, for a long time, the shamans believed that their power was the same as that of the animals, plants, the sun and the basic energies of the Universe. Thousands of years before Charles Darwin, peoples of shamanic culture were certain that man and animal

are akin. Even though the mythical paradise of the unity between man and animal is lost for the common sense, for the shaman and those who look for spiritual vision the uncommon reality is still accessible.

Anne BANCROFT (1987, p. 27-28) asserts that “in shamanic societies of recent date, it has been the custom to take one animal as the embodiment of the ancestral spirit. [...] It embodied the soul of each individual in the group; at initiation times he or she would know the experience of unity with all the group through the living force of the totemic animal.” Therefore, when Cuchulain shows to have great intimacy with forces which are beyond common human knowledge, it is not difficult to conclude that he is on the right path to initiation.

At another moment, still talking to the Young Man, he says,

I am their [the god's] plough, their harrow, their very strength:  
 For he that is in the sun begot this body  
 Upon a mortal woman, and I have heard tell  
 It seems as if he had outrun the moon  
 That he must follow always through waste heaven,  
 He loved so happily. He'll be but slow  
 To break a tree that was so sweetly planted.  
 Let's see that arm. I'll see it if I choose.  
 That arm had a good father and a good mother,  
 But it is not like this.  
 (BS, p. 266).

While addressing his son, Cuchulain once more emphasizes his superhuman origin and ironically comments on the weakness of the younger generations, which are not so strong as their ancestors. He praises the old times for their strength and their sound offsprings. He faces the Young Man by saying that, being a descendant of the gods, they would not fail him; nevertheless, his words bring a strong dramatic irony for,

without being aware of it, he is the one who will 'break the tree that was so sweetly planted.'

He talks about having been tried by his father, who challenged him to battle but who, before the decisive fight, revealed his identity and gave him a cloak woven by women of the Country-under-Wave. It is this precious token Cuchulain intends to give the Young Man as a sign of friendship. According to the shamanic view, nothing is more insulting or profaning than refusing a gift offered unconditionally by the spiritual world or by any creature of the ordinary reality. The refusal produces a state of severe unbalance that leads to suffering and pain. When someone receives a present, he/she is in fact honouring the person who gave it and reinforcing the harmony between the spiritual and the ordinary worlds. (STEVENS; STEVENS, 1992, p. 129-130).

Even in the exchange of gifts both heroes prove not to be second-rate people: the Irish warrior intends to give the lad a magic cloak, which represents nobility and protection, and he wants to receive the boy's arm-ring, which is also a sign of protection, alliance and a kind of talisman for, in conformity with the Oriental philosophy, the arm-ring is worn by fighters to protect a vital centre of energy. Therefore, it is not only the material value which is being taken into consideration; both seem to be aware of the existence of a parallel reality and the importance of keeping the balance between the spiritual and ordinary worlds.

Cuchulain refuses to fight the Young Man and defends him with protective words and gestures,

Whatever man  
Would fight with you shall fight it out with me.

.....  
Boy, I would meet them all in arms  
If I'd a son like you. He would avenge me  
(BS, p. 269).

The brave hero shows tenderness and affection when he calls the stranger 'boy.' Once more, he says,

— Boy,  
If I had fought my father, he'd have killed me,  
As certainly as if I had a son  
And fought with him, I should be deadly to him;  
For the old fiery fountains are far off  
And every day there is less heat o' the blood.  
(BS, p. 270).

These words allude to Yeats's proposal for Irish nationalism; his purpose was to incite the younger generations to fight for a better and independent nation by bringing forth the theme of the strength of the old days. Modern man has degenerated and, being far from the 'fiery fountains,' has less vigour and fire; consequently, he is getting distant from the path of initiation and from the ultimate truth that existed *in illo tempore*, in mythical time.

Cuchulain's disobedience of Conchubar's commands makes the latter say that he himself will fight the Young Man; when the hero seizes the sovereign before the other kings, he feels threatened, but eventually convinces Cuchulain that he is under the influence of witchcraft. Then the father bids the son to go to the strand to fight.

As in the Attic theatre, the duel takes place offstage. When Cuchulain comes back, he has already killed the lad. He takes a handful of feathers and begins to clean the blood from his sword. Then the Fool, a character that does not exist in the original

saga, starts provoking Cuchulain with bits of the story the Blind Man has told him about the identity of the Young Man who is, in fact, Aoife's only son.

The great hero wants to believe the boy was someone else's son, but the Fool declares that the Blind Man said

he heard Aoife boast that she'd never but the one lover,  
and he the only man that had overcome her in battle.  
(BS, p. 276).<sup>3</sup>

A pause follows this speech; then Cuchulain realizes he has slain his own son. His words are bitter; he blames Conchubar and leaves the house. The Fool follows him with his eyes and tells the Blind Man what he sees. Instead of fighting the High King and all the men of Ulster, Cuchulain fights the waves and is apparently mastered by them. Both the Fool and his companion leave the house to steal and go on with their ordinary lives.

Since the very beginning of the play, one can feel the atmosphere has overtones of a non-natural world. A big door (threshold to the underworld) is at the back and there is misty light as of sea-mist. The ambience suggests mystery; there is economy of props, but the drinking-horns (reminders of the close contact between warrior/hunter and animal life) certainly hint to the reader/audience that there exists the possibility of a shamanic experience. Actually, one of the most relevant characteristics of a shaman is his close contact with the spirits of animals; the animal spirit is believed to give the initiate a great power and vision, and he assimilates the qualities of the creature whose presence accompanies him.<sup>4</sup> Through this signifying prop, one is led to a mythical age in which bravery and pagan celebration were side by

side. But even this era is far from the cosmogonic act of creation, and the horn “shows the need people continued to have for contact with the supernatural animal world.” (BANCROFT, 1987, p. 175).

The Fool’s mentioning of the witches also reinforces the idea of a superhuman existence — and the belief in their power opens the channel for a deeper and initiatory contact with this supernatural reality. Conchubar, on his turn, also believes in witchcraft — but he has come to the strand only to become Cuchulain’s master. He knows Cuchulain has run too wild, and the king’s children, heirs to the throne, feel threatened by the hero’s deeds. Once more it is the Fool who narrates some of the feats which, in reality, demonstrate Cuchulain has superior power and strength and, like Hercules of the Greek mythology, undergoes several trials which are a means to achieve his own initiation. The jester sings, pointing out the Irish hero’s superhuman deeds,

Cuchulain has killed kings,  
 Kings and sons of kings,  
 Dragons out of the water,  
 And witches out of the air,  
 Banachas and Bonachas and people of the woods.  
 Witches that steal the milk,  
 Fomor that steal the children,  
 Hags that have heads like hares,  
 Hares that have claws like witches,  
 All riding a-cock-horse  
     *[Spoken]*  
 Out of the very bottom of the bitter black North.  
 (BS, p. 251).

Killing kings is, in fact, characteristic of several initiatory patterns; it is a proof that the man who performs such a brave act is as strong, powerful and royal as a sovereign. In the old sagas, from his early boyhood Cuchulain possesses an

unquenchable divine inner heat which makes him, in his ire, slaughter lots of enemies — among them several kings — at once. Even though it is not a requisite for shamanism, Ward RUTHERFORD (1986, p. 116) states that, despite a historical eclipse and suppression of old religious practices, in some places the shamans managed to survive “becoming not only king-makers, but also king-slayers.” This idea is complemented by Anne BANCROFT (1987, p. 105), who affirms that, in druidic times, the shamans “were in charge of the appointing of kings (the old king was often ritually killed before the new one was chosen).” Therefore, little by little, Cuchulain seems to assume all traits which may lead him to the accomplishment of an initiatory ordeal.

The passage cited also refers to dragons, legendary beings which make part of the old mythology and that, as animals, dwell in the rich shamanic imagination as well as witches and people with animal features or vice-versa.<sup>5</sup> The Blind Man says that Cuchulain doesn't care for common fighting, but if it were a white fawn that might turn into a queen before morning, he would fight passionately. Through his words, one can deduce that the duel with the Young Man is no common fighting at all; it is a higher strife which will lead Cuchulain to the pattern of initiation. In fact, the Blind Man touches upon the possibility of an animal changing into a human being; that recalls the shamanic metamorphosis into different animal forms. ELIADE (1989, p. 467) asserts that certain societies “involve the member's magical transformation into a dog or a wolf. Shamans, too, can turn themselves into wolves, but [...] they can



assume a number of other animal forms,” thus corroborating the idea of transfiguration within shamanism.

When Cuchulain first appears, his voice is heard in anger. Conchubar refers to the wildness of the hero's blood as something powerful but at the same time extremely dangerous; therefore, he wants the warrior to take an oath, what makes him answer,

And I must be obedient in all things;  
 .....  
 Must I, that held you on the throne when all  
 Had pulled you from it, swear obedience  
 As if I were some cattle-raising king?  
 Are my shins speckled with the heat of the fire,  
 Or have my hands no skill but to make figures  
 Upon the ashes with a stick? Am I  
 So slack an idle that I need a whip  
 Before I serve you?  
 (BS, p. 255).

Cuchulain feels revolted against the king's wish for subservience and domesticity. He considers himself able to serve the sovereign without a whip or without taking the oath. He is conscious of the responsibility towards his countrymen for his deeds might change the reality around him; he does not belong to the tame corner of civilization and wants to grab reality so as to make it part of himself.

Conchubar then talks about Aoife, whose hatred threatens the whole kingdom of Ulster. Cuchulain praises her qualities and gets to the conclusion that he has never

known love but as a kiss  
 In the mid-battle, and a difficult truce  
 Of oil and water, candles and dark night,  
 Hillside and hollow, the hot-footed sun  
 And the cold, sliding, slippery-footed moon —  
 A brief forgiveness between opposites  
 That have been hatreds for three times the age  
 Of this long-'stablished ground.  
 (BS, p. 259).

The antithetical pairs reveal the tension of opposites which forms the basis of Yeats's thought. In ancient Greece, HERAKLEITOS had already stated (*apud* BURNET, 1975, p. 136) that harmony is "an attunement of opposite tensions, like that of the bow and the lyre." In **On Baile's Strand**, Cuchulain experiences deep inner struggle; in fact, he does not want to be bound by an oath for he praises free will; however, his role within the society he lives in requires a well-defined position; it requires the affirmation of his total obeisance to the king.

But the great warrior has different plans. When Cochubar says he needs Cuchulain's

might of hand and burning heart  
(**BS**, p. 260).

— which once more refers to his heroic features showing that he is a gifted man, with enough qualities to undertake an initiatory ordeal — the hero's answer is plain,

[*going near the door*]  
Nestlings of a high nest,  
Hawks that have followed me into the air:  
And looked upon the sun, we'll out of this  
And sail upon the wind once more.

.....  
Run to the stable  
And set the horses to the chariot-pole,  
And send a messenger to the harp-players.  
We'll find a level place among the woods,  
And dance awhile.  
(**BS**, p. 260).

Undoubtedly his words reveal a pattern of shamanic rituals. Close to the door — a traditional symbol for communication with the Other World —, he summons the 'nestlings' to follow him into the air once more. Bird imagery referring to the voyages clearly hint at the shamanic trance-like state. And the flight symbolism, (ELIADE,

1989, p. 478) suggested in the ability he has to sail upon the wind, stands for the capacity the shamans have to experience a magical flight, a moment in which their souls wander out of their physical body. He also refers to the woods (the sacred place of the Druids, who are considered the shaman-priests of the Celts)<sup>6</sup> as a spot for pleasure, poetry and dance rituals, skills which a real shaman should master.<sup>7</sup> Besides that, he intends to go to the forest being conducted by horses, which are an incontestable shamanic device: they are the animals that mediate between the material and the spiritual worlds; they produce “the ‘break-through in plane,’ the passage from this world to other worlds.” (ELIADE, 1989, p. 467).

While he talks to the king, three women prepare the ritual for the oath. Two of them carry a bowl of fire and the third one puts fragrant herbs into it. Both the flames and the scent are elements strictly necessary for an initiation rite. Fire is used to purify the ambience as well as to enlighten the initiand’s mind and the path he is supposed to follow; it stands for transmutation and the beginning of a new life. (ELIADE, 1979, p. 83). Herbs are devices which keep evil spirits off; their pleasing odour also clears the way for the good helpers that live in other spheres. The smoke which ascends to heaven is a symbol of spirituality and communication with a supernatural dimension. When Cuchulain is finally led to take the oath, Conchubar states,

On this fire  
That has been lighted from your hearth and mine;  
The older men shall be my witnesses,  
The younger, yours. The holders of the fire  
Shall purify the thresholds of the house  
With waving fire, and shut the outer door,  
According to the custom; and sing rhyme  
That has come down from the old law-makers  
To blow the witches out.  
(BS, p. 261).

The rhyme the holders of the fire sing in a low voice is an incantatory song. They exorcize the Shape-Changers, feminine creatures whose powerful witchcraft deceives man. Through the use of fire, which represents the universal theme of the restoration of balance and purity (KALWEIT, 1992, p. 125), they intend to extinguish all the evil.

The Shape-Changers can even change into hounds — a shamanic device, as already seen — and completely master the man who faces them. The song admonishes for the risks the initiand takes while in a trance-like state, for the women are a product of their fancy or altered state of consciousness; they are

but whirling wind,  
Out of memory and mind.  
They would make a prince decay  
With light images of clay  
Planted in running wave;  
Or, for many shapes they have,  
They would change them into hounds  
Until he had died of his wounds,  
Though the change were but a whim  
(BS, p. 262).

If the neophyte allows his imagination to take him too far away from his body, his soul can get lost and it will not be able to come back, what might even provoke the death of the individual who has ventured into such a dangerous soujourn.<sup>8</sup>

The indomitable shapes can also make strong use of magic words and cast a spell on the man who, completely seduced, will follow them with ungovernable desire,

But the man is thrice forlorn,  
Emptied, ruined, wracked and lost,  
That they follow, for at most  
They will give him kiss for kiss  
While they murmur, 'After this  
Hatred may be sweet to the taste.'  
Those wild hands that have embraced

All his body can but shove  
 At the burning wheel of love  
 Till the side of hate comes up.  
 (BS, p. 262-263).

The chant recalls the Greek theatre in the sense that the curse (foreshadowed in **At the Hawk's Well**) is on the verge of taking place. It also refers to the tension of opposites and hard struggle which makes the wheel of life go round an round until, at a later stage, it reaches the balance searched for.

The antinomies love and hate are always present in Yeats's work. When the Women refer to the wheel of love which turns around 'till the side of hate comes up,' they are hinting at the end of an era and the beginning of another, which corresponds to Yeats's actual belief, as expressed in **A Vision**. Besides that, in **On Baile's Strand**, one whole cycle is completed, for Cuchulain is finally induced to slay his offspring — a son he had conceived during his adventures at the Hawk's Well — and meet the boundless sea.

Cuchulain's great admiration for Aoife, the Young Man's mother, is no secret at all. But one can see his love turning into hatred mainly in the legend in which, after having slain the brave young warrior, he goes to the strand where there is a great white stone and, taking his sword in his right hand, he says, "if I had the head of the woman that sent her son to his death, I would split it as I split this stone." (GREGORY, 1979, p. 241). And he makes four quarters of the stone; then he fights with the waves.

Cuchulain speaks while the Women are singing; without knowing that his words are dramatically ironic, he says he has never given a gift and taken it again. All

irony lies in the fact that he gave life to a son and is going to take it. When he is finally ready to swear obedience, two of the Women bend down before him, and he stretches out his hands over the flame.<sup>9</sup>

Most probably, the light over their heads symbolizes the light which “searches out truth or reveals the unseen future.” (RUTHERFORD, 1986, p. 95). Actually, through their chant, the holders of the fire reveal to be aware of the hero’s future. But he will have to undergo a much harder trial than just being bound to strict domesticity having to serve the threshold and the hearthstone. While taking the oath, he thrusts his sword into the flame and the kings kneel down in a semicircle. The stage directions reinforce the idea of a magic ritual since the shape of the semicircle suggests a mystic mandala. Besides that, kneeling reveals humility, respect and subservience, ingredients necessary for a ritual of initiation and introduction of the neophyte to his new spiritual leader.

In order to become an initiate, the novice endures hard trial and is guided by a master. Conchubar comes to the strand

to be Cuchulain’s master in earnest from this day out.  
(BS, p. 249).

He imposes the oath, and it is his commandment which will throw Cuchulain onto a challenging initiatory path.

When the Young Man arrives saying he is from Aoife’s country, the Kings rush towards him; Cuchulain throws himself between and tries to be ethical, since the foreigner is but one against several people. Even though the young warrior does not reveal his identity, he shows great nobility of character.

Several incidents follow this scene; Cuchulain even tries to make an alliance with the lad, refusing to accept the King's instruction to kill him. Then, master Conchubar eventually convinces the Irish champion that he is under a spell. Astonished, Cuchulain cannot believe he has laid hands on the High King himself. At this moment, he attempts to rationalize and gets to the conclusion that his offence to the sovereign is a product of witchcraft. Completely blinded and acting against all his natural intuition, he summons the Young Man to the strand, where he finally kills him.

The three Women — whose dramatic function is similar to that of the Chorus in the Greek tragedies — comment on the events. The First one says she has been shown that which is to come in the ashes of the bowl.<sup>10</sup> The First Woman declares to have seen

Cuchulain's roof-tree  
Leap into fire, and the walls split and blaken.  
(BS, p. 271).

In her vision, she sees complete devastation in his dwelling place. The striking image of the fire, which suggests transmutation of energy, is highlighted by the contrast of the walls that split and blacken. Besides evoking disjunction, scission, dissolution, fragmentation, the breach also indicates an access door to a different dimension, to the underworld. The colour black which comes up, tinging the walls and the interspace as well, hints at the entrance of a cave, which is a spot propitious for an initiatory descent.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, she anticipates the hero's supreme ordeal.

When Cuchulain comes back after having slain the lad offstage, he accidentally discovers he is the boy's father. Possessed by great heat, he defies the King, who has fled away. His pain is so extreme that he seeks for oblivion on the strand; he rushes into the sea and fights the merciless waves which are going to wash up his memory. Once more it can be said that his actions disclose a shamanic ordeal.

Among the Eskimos,

when on the verge of going into trance, the shaman makes movements as if he were diving. Even when he is supposed to be entering the subterranean regions, he gives the impression that he is diving and returning to the surface of the ocean. Thalbitzer was told that a shaman 'comes up a third time, before he goes down for good.' The term most commonly used in referring to a shaman is 'one who drops down to the bottom of the sea.' (ELIADE, 1989, p. 293).

These words can throw some light at the Fool's remarks when he narrates

Cuchulain's performance in the waters,

There, he is down! He is up again. He is going out in deep water. There is a big wave. It has gone over him. I cannot see him now. He has killed kings and giants, but the waves have mastered him, the waves have mastered him!  
(BS, p. 278).

In fact, Cuchulain's immersion is highly symbolic; it is "equivalent to a dissolution of forms. This is why the symbolism of the waters implies both death and rebirth. Contact with water always brings a regeneration — on the one hand because dissolution is followed by a new birth, on the other because immersion fertilizes and multiplies the potential of life." (ELIADE, 1959, p. 130). Hence, Cuchulain's fighting with the waves, which is also a metaphor for his personal **immersion** and struggle with his own divided self, has a positive connotation. His apparent madness corresponds to the crisis the novice has to undergo in order to become an initiate; after all, "only a shock resulting from the greatest possible conflict can make the greatest



possible change.” (YEATS, 1977, p. 119). The next step within Cuchulain’s initiatory ordeal is the soujourn to the underworld, which is beautifully narrated in **The Only Jealousy of Emer.**

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> YEATS, William. B. **On Baile's Strand**. In: \_\_\_\_\_. **The collected plays of W. B. Yeats**, p. 245-278.

All references from the play will be taken from this edition, hereafter cited in the text in parenthesis as **BS**, followed by indication concerning page number.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout his work, Yeats has always employed images which concern the possession of a mortal woman by a god. In the poem "Leda and the Swan," he takes out of the Greek mythology the passage in which Zeus, in the form of a swan, rapes Leda and she bears two children.

Coincidentally or not, "reencontramos a imagem arquetípica do Pai associada à do Iniciador e a do psicopompo em um mito siberiano [...] que faz da águia [na Irlanda, seu papel parece ter sido representado pelo falcão] o herói civilizador, Pai dos xamãs: o Altíssimo envia a águia para socorrer os homens, atormentados pelos maus espíritos, portadores das enfermidades e da morte; mas os homens não entendem a linguagem do mensageiro; Deus, então, ordena-lhe dar aos homens o dom de xamanizar (embruxar, exorcizar); a águia torna a descer à terra e emprenha uma mulher; esta dá à luz o primeiro xamã." (CHEVALIER; GHEERBRANT, 1989, p. 24).

The parallelism between this image and that of the conception of Cuchulain is remarkable. If, according to the Siberian myth, the eagle gives birth to the first shaman, (see ELIADE, 1989, p. 157) one may conclude that Cuchulain, being the offspring of a similar sexual intercourse, has all the features to become a real shaman.

Besides that, the theme of possession by a god (goddess) or a 'spirit' as related to shamanism is documented by some other writers. In **Ensoñacion y Espacio Interior**, Holger KALWEIT (1992, p. 159) affirms, "los chamanes que celebran un verdadero matrimonio o entran en una relación sexual con ciertos seres espirituales tienen una relación especial con el mundo de los espíritus. Sin embargo, al considerar dichos casos es necesario no enfatizar demasiado la diferencia entre estos cónyuges o parejas sexuales por un lado, y espíritus ayudantes o protectores por el otro. La dependencia del chamán de su espíritu ayudante va desde la obediencia absoluta hasta la reciprocidad. El chamán posee una unión muy personal con el más allá, de modo que no debemos considerarlos contactos sexuales y eróticos entre los niveles de existencia involucrados como inusuales o extraordinarios."

<sup>3</sup> SOKEI-AN, a Zen master, says (*apud* BANCROFT, 1979, p. 12) that “before the female hawk will copulate with the male she flies for three days through the sky with the male pursuing her; only one who can overtake her can have her.” Besides confirming Cuchulain’s initiatory ordeal, this Buddhist tale is also a reminder of the shamanic power over animals.

<sup>4</sup> “Dentre os homens, o xamã é o único que normalmente é capaz de efetuar a unidade animal-homem, entrando em EXC. [...] A pessoa que possui um animal guardião costuma absorver dele o poder espiritual de todo o seu gênero ou espécie [...]. Através do seu espírito guardião ou animal de poder o xamã faz conexão com o poder do mundo animal, com os mamíferos, pássaros, peixes e outros seres.” (HARNER, 1989, p. 99).

<sup>5</sup> While analysing the power animals, HARNER (1989, p. 101) states that there exists a sign of power when the animal “se faz visível navegando um elemento que não constitui o seu ambiente ‘normal’. Exemplos comuns são os de um mamífero terreno ou uma serpente voando pelo espaço, com ou sem o auxílio de asas. Todas essas possibilidades mostram que o animal é realmente incomum, um dono do poder, apto a transcender a natureza de um animal comum e sua existência comum.”

It is generally accepted that mythical dragons are terrestrial animals that possess the great power of throwing fire through their nostrils. In BS, however, these animals come out of water, which does not seem to be their natural habitat, a detail which reinforces the belief in a shamanic pattern of initiation. This idea is also corroborated by HARNER, (1989, p. 112) who asseverates that in ASC (Altered States of Consciousness), there are no mythical animals and the Dragon is as real as the others.

<sup>6</sup> Anne BANCROFT (1987, p. 104) points out that the Druids were not ordinary priests; they exercised “a strange and dramatic priesthood. Their very name, *dru-wid-es*, means ‘the far-seeing ones’, a term which could mean prophetic vision, wise insight, or the more ancient shamanic vision while in flight.” She asserts that “the Celts had little use for formal buildings as places of worship, but preferred a shrine in a natural setting, usually in a grove of trees,” (p. 101) and complements by saying that the druidic doctrine left “an extraordinary tradition which lasted for several millenia of shamanic-priest-magicians — a body of men [...] who brought knowledge of many dimensions of being.” (p. 105-107).

<sup>7</sup> ELIADE (1989, p. 30) asseverates that “among the Kazak Kirgiz the **baqça** [their ‘shaman’], singer, poet, musician, diviner, priest, and doctor, appears to be the guardian of religious and popular traditions, preserver of legends several centuries old.”

<sup>8</sup> “Healer and psychopomp, the shaman is these because he commands the techniques of ecstasy — that is, because his soul can safely abandon his body and roam at vast distances, can penetrate the underworld and rise to the sky.[...] [nevertheless] the danger of losing his way in these forbidden regions is still great.” (ELIADE, 1989, p. 182). “Like any wanderer, the errant soul can get lost, and the body, thus deprived, sickens.” (RUTHERFORD, 1986, p. 55).

<sup>9</sup> RUTHERFORD observes that keeping the fire was a vital task under the responsibility of women, the real guardians of the tribal hearth, while “hunting must always have been a primarily male activity. Even if they wanted to participate, it was rare for women to be able to do so since they were fully occupied with tasks much like those our society still delegates to them: cleaning, sewing and cooking. The last involved fire and so connects with the other feminine chore of maintaining the tribal hearth. However, before the discovery of the means of making it were known, fire could be obtained only from naturally occurring — hence ‘divine’ — sources, spontaneous combustion, lightning strikes and the like. The rarity and unpredictability of these, made conservation of the fire, once lit, vital.” (RUTHERFORD, 1986, p. 23).

<sup>10</sup> RUTHERFORD (1986, p. 72) asseverates that “in the matter of prediction, the shaman seems to be notably successful. Certainly one of the capacities which impressed outside observers, even the most sceptical, was his quite extraordinary rapport with the natural elements. It was as though he was constantly aware of invisible emanations from animals, plants, trees, even from rocks and running waters, surrounding, even permeating him.”

<sup>11</sup> ELIADE (1989, p. 52) states that “caves play an important part in the initiation [...]; it is in caves that aspirants have dreams and meet their helping spirits.”

## 5 THE ONLY JEALOUSY OF EMER: the flight of the soul

*What thou lovest well remains,  
the rest is dross  
What thou lov'st well shall not be reft from thee  
What thou lov'st well is thy true heritage*  
Ezra Pound, *Cantos*, LXXXI

**The Only Jealousy of Emer**, first published in 1919, is the product of Yeats's adaptation of the old saga beautifully narrated in Lady Gregory's **Cuchulain of Muirthemne**. Innumerable details are left aside as the playwright adapts the story and gives Emer the responsibility of choosing between Cuchulain's life or his death. As Birgit BJERSBY (1978, p. 58) states,

Yeats' Cuchulain plays are all concerned with one moment of intensity, one moment of passion, round which everything is concentrated. There is nothing of the long intricate and detailed descriptions of the saga itself. Yeats singles out a few characteristic details and in his own way creates something new. He shows us that the ancient sagas live a life of their own and are able to provide the poets of all ages with new inspiration. Yeats, with his claim to poetic licence, brought his own aspect to the saga thus showing that every age *may* bring a new aspect to an ancient story.

In the saga, the Ulstermen had gathered for their Samhain festivities when a flock of beautiful birds flew over the lake. As every woman wanted to have a bird, Cuchulain was asked to catch them, a task in which he was well succeeded. Eithne Inguba, his mistress, was the only one not to get any bird at all.

Not long after that there came two wonderful birds, linked together by a chain of gold. Eithne advised him not to seize them for they had enchantment. Cuchulain insisted on catching the songbirds but, for the first time in his life, he missed all the casts he had made and saw his attempts frustrated.

Extremely vexed, he rested his head against a rock and fell asleep. In a dream he was visited by two women wearing cloaks; they took their rods and, alternately, beat him until he was “more dead than alive.” (GREGORY, 1979, p. 211). At night, he stood up in his sleep but did not tell any person about his vision; next, he ordered to be taken to the city of Emain where, in isolation, he spent a whole year without speaking to anybody.

At the eve of the next Samhain, his fellowmen were sitting round his sickbed when Angus, a being from the world of Fand, came and said that Liban, Fand’s sister, would heal him setting him free of his weakness and stupor. By this time Emer was asked to visit her husband. In the meantime, Cuchulain was invited by Liban to go to Fand’s country; he stayed together with her for a whole month. Then they settled to meet again on Baile’s Strand. Extremely angry and jealous of her mate, Emer assembled an army of fifty young girls ready to kill Fand with sharpened knives.

Cuchulain defended Fand from Emer’s attack; both women started speaking up their love for the brave hero until Manannan, the great son of the sea and Fand’s own husband, came to take her back to their world. Cuchulain fell ill again until Conchubar bade the Druids to give him a drink of forgetfulness, which Emer also

drank. Manannan shook his cloak between Cuchulain and Fand to prevent them from meeting each other again.

Yeats's piece differs from the saga for it has not so many actions; it focuses on a single moment of decision and Emer is the protagonist of such a dramatic instant; Cuchulain's future lies upon her resolution.

Actually, the play is supposed to be the extension of **On Baile's Strand**, which ends when Cuchulain fights the waves and is mastered by them. **The Only Jealousy of Emer** starts with the great hero in his sickbed, after the waves have brought his 'senseless image' up. Emer attends to him and asks Eithne Inguba to help her summon Cuchulain back to life. In both the legend and play plentiful details belonging to a shamanic ordeal can be found. From the very presentation of the persons in the play something mysterious hints at the readers' senses. Some of the characters wear masks or have their faces made up to resemble masks. Evidently it is a characteristic of the Noh which, added up to Yeats's peculiar handling of it, gains in depth and significance.

Generally, the characters who wear masks are those who participate either in the human or supernatural spheres<sup>1</sup> or even in both. The Ghost of Cuchulain, the Figure of Cuchulain and the Woman of the Sidhe call up that this is a play which deals with the otherworld. This simple detail reminds the reader of the possibility — almost certainty — of a shamanic exercise. This idea is corroborated by Carmen BLACKER's (1986, p. 31) belief that many of the Noh plays,

particularly those in which a supernatural being is manifested, are in themselves concealed shamanic rituals. They contain sounds and symbols which were in former times used to call up a ghost and cause it to speak, or to cajole a divinity to descend, to dance and to deliver blessings. In these plays we may still hear the flutes and drums whose sounds were believed capable of resonance in another world, and the mantic howls and wails which were once calls to the dead and the local divinity.

**Jealousy** starts when the Musicians enter. Yeats's use of the Musicians<sup>2</sup> in a Noh style is an element that certainly goes against the slightest idea of naturalism in art. They have flute, drum, gong and zither to accompany the ritual of the folding and unfolding of the cloth. Their song has as its main theme the delicacy of feminine beauty and transitoriness of life itself,

A woman's beauty is like a white  
Frail bird, like a white sea-bird alone  
At daybreak after stormy night  
Between two furrows upon the ploughed land:  
A sudden storm, and it was thrown  
Between dark furrows upon the ploughed land.  
(OJE, p. 281).<sup>3</sup>

Also, Yeats's own belief in reincarnation and the system he develops in **A Vision**<sup>4</sup> are clearly voiced,

How many centuries spent  
The sedentary soul  
In toils of measurement  
Beyond eagle or mole,  
Beyond hearing or seeing,  
Or Archimedes' guess,  
To raise into being  
That loveliness?  
(OJE, p. 281-282).

It seems the soul has to work hard to achieve loveliness; Cuchulain's soul will also have to endure hard toil to achieve initiation; as part of its apprenticeship, the soul is supposed to wander

Beyond eagle or mole  
Beyond hearing or seeing



— which might correspond either to the shamanic ascent to heaven (eagle), descent to the underworld (mole), or even the initiatory trance state in which both hearing and seeing are completely altered and the novice sees beyond the ordinary reality.

Reg SKENE (1974, p. 202) interprets both lines as the soul's sedentary toil "beyond the world of our experience [...] in a world which is beyond the reach of our senses." His words seem to confirm the soul's flight as understood within the shamanic initiation pattern, where the magical flight is seen as "the expression both of the soul's autonomy and of ecstasy. [...] It is also related to the symbolism of ascension." (ELIADE, 1989, p. 479).

The second part of the song runs as follows,

A strange, unserviceable thing,  
A fragile, exquisite, pale shell,  
That the vast troubled waters bring  
To the loud sands before day has broken.  
(OJE, p. 282).

It is a reference to Cuchulain's body (a pale shell) being brought ashore by 'the vast troubled waters.' It is not inhabited by a soul anymore; therefore, it seems to be strange and unserviceable, an empty involucre. Undoubtedly it suggests a kind of trance, "a deep, comatose state of suspended animation. This is the condition into which the ascetic's body must fall if his soul is to leave it in order to travel to other realms of the cosmos. His body remains behind, an empty husk, while his soul traverses barriers through which it cannot follow." (BLACKER, 1980, p. 23). It must not be forgotten that, during his ecstatic experience, the shaman's soul is supposed to

leave his body and he is “to all appearances a corpse [...] falling dead to the ground.”  
(RUTHERFORD, 1986, p. 98).

And the Musicians keep on with their tune,

What death? What discipline?  
What bonds no man could unbind,  
Being imagined within  
The labyrinth of the mind,  
(OJE, p. 282).

The song alludes to the symbolic death and hard period of instruction (discipline) the novice has to endure during his ordeal. His ecstatic journey takes place in the complex ‘labyrinth of the mind’ which indicates the trance state required in initiatory ordeals. As ELIADE (1989, p. 51) asserts, “the cave and the labyrinth continue to have a function of the first importance in the initiation rites [...]; both, indeed, are concrete symbols of passage into another world, of a descent to the underworld.”<sup>5</sup> In fact, “the cave is the place of rebirth, that secret cavity in which one is shut up in order to be incubated and renewed.” (JUNG, 1975, p. 135).<sup>6</sup>

When Cuchulain is first seen in the play, he is in his grave-clothes and wears a heroic mask which is not only an allusion to the supernatural within the Noh theatre, but is also associated with shamanism in the sense that it “manifestly announces the incarnation of a mythical personage.” (ELIADE, 1989, p. 167-168).

The First Musician’s speech pictures the setting,

I call before the eyes a roof  
With cross-beams darkened by smoke;  
A fisher’s net hangs from a beam,  
A long oar lies against the wall.  
I call up a poor fisher’s house;  
A man lies dead or swooning,  
That amorous man,

That amorous, violent man, renowned Cuchulain,  
 Queen Emer at his side.  
 (OJE, p. 283).

After having been brought ashore by the waves, Cuchulain is taken to a fisherman's house where he 'lies dead or swooning,' a fact which indicates his initiatory sickness. ELIADE (1989, p. 33) affirms that "the imminence of death felt by the sick man (pain, unconsciousness, etc.) recalls the symbolic death represented in almost all initiation ceremonies." When Eithne Inguba asks if he has died, Emer answers he is not dead, and tells her what happened on Baile's strand up to the moment in which he killed his son. Then,

mad with sorrow, he ran out;  
 And after, to his middle in the foam,  
 With shield before him and with sword in hand,  
 He fought the deathless sea  
 .....  
 Until the water had swept over him;  
 But the waves washed his senseless image up  
 And laid it at this door.  
 (OJE, p. 284).

Emer knows that an image has been put in her husband's place. Eithne, then, asks her to summon him back and help him expel the changeling from his motionless body. Both women know that soul loss<sup>7</sup> is the cause of Cuchulain's illness and that they have to "search for the soul that has strayed away or been abducted by spirits." (ELIADE, 1989, p. 309).

Before trying to call him back, Emer covers his face to hide the sea, "out of which can come daemonic possession." (NATHAN, 1966, p. 225). She also provides new logs and revives the flames because she believes that all the enchantments of the dreaming foam hesitate in the sight of the hearth-fire. Emer seems to be aware of a

parallel reality which is not perceived by the common eye; in fact, such a parallel dimension makes part of a world of magic which is the universe of the shaman. While she puts the logs in the fire, the Musicians accompany her movements with drum and flute, marking the beginning of a shamanic séance.

Eithne is the first to call Cuchulain's soul back, but she fails. Emer insists,

Then kiss that image:  
The pressure of your mouth upon his mouth  
May reach him where he is.  
(OJE, p. 287).

It is interesting to observe that, in reality, Emer's comment suggests the shamanic use of *suction*, a technique adopted by the shamans when they try to extract the intrusive entities or obtrusive energy from the patient's body. (HARNER, 1989, p. 47,178).

Eithne Inguba tries once more, but gets scared,

[*starting back*]. It is no man.  
I felt some evil thing that dried my heart  
When my lips touched it.  
(OJE, p. 287).

Suddenly she realizes the creature that possesses Cuchulain's body is probably evil and his enemy as well. (HARNER, 1989, p. 179).

But Emer seems to believe Eithne has succeeded in her task, being able to drive the spirit out,

No, his body stirs;  
The pressure of your mouth has called him home;  
He has thrown the changeling out.  
(OJE, p. 287).

Her momentary failure to recognize that the presence was not thrown out may be justified by the fact that, in some of the Noh plays, "the figure who appears resembles his living counterpart so closely that it is only when he announces that he is a ghost

that his true nature is recognisable.” (BLACKER, 1980, p. 50). But when she sees the withered arm she asks his true identity. He replies he has come from Manannan’s court and that he is Bricriu, not the man but a supernatural being, intermediary among gods and men.

Eithne Inguba leaves when she perceives his distorted face; Emer, however, addresses him and discovers he has come to bargain about Cuchulain’s freedom. The hero’s soul is captive in a world unknown to those who have not experienced great suffering or symbolic death. Bricriu says that when the Sidhe set a captive free there is a price to be paid — and Emer would have to subject to his power and renounce Cuchulain’s love forever if she wanted her husband to be restored to life again.

Bricriu wants Emer to follow his instructions; he insists by saying she dares not be accursed, yet Cuchulain has dared. In fact, the curse fell on him after he affronted the Guardian of the Well; the outcome of such a gesture was the killing of his own son on Baile’s strand, the consequent fight with the waves that mastered him and his being finally brought ashore in a death-like state. The desolate wife tries to resist,

I have but two joyous thoughts, two things I prize,  
A hope, a memory, and now you claim that hope.

FIGURE OF CUCHULAIN - He’ll never sit beside you at hearth  
Or make old bones, but die of wound and toil  
On some far shore or mountain, a strange woman  
Beside his mattress.

EMER - You ask for my one hope  
That you may bring your curse on all about him.  
(OJE, p. 289).

She believes Bricriu's words are another curse, for he will never make old bones; he will die young, and far from her.

Then, the maker of discord decides to incite her jealousy,

You've watched his loves and you have not been jealous,  
Knowing that he would tire, but do those tire  
That love the Sidhe? Come closer to the bed  
That I may touch your eyes and give them sight.  
(OJE, p. 289).

He touches her eyes and she sees the crouching Ghost of Cuchulain, who is totally deprived of the senses; he is a mere phantom; he can neither touch, nor hear, nor see, nor rest. Being shut off, he only dreams, without knowing where he is. Bricriu deals with Emer; little by little, she seems to realize that her familiar human world is no more than a narrow segment of the cosmos which now confronts her;

Beyond it lies a further realm, altogether 'other', peopled by beings non-human, endowed with powers non-human, whose whole order of existence is ambivalent, mysterious and strange. Between these two worlds there is no ordinary continuity. Each is contained, like a walled garden, by its own order of being, and separated by a barrier which represents a rupture of level, a break in ontological plane. This barrier the ordinary man or woman is powerless to cross. They cannot at will make the passage to this other perilous plane, nor can they see, hear or in any way influence the beings who dwell there. The spiritual beings on the other side are not so confined. (BLACKER, 1980, p. 20).

Suddenly Emer notices the presence of a Woman of the Sidhe; Bricriu says she has come from the Country-under-Wave and intends to lure Cuchulain

for the Sidhe  
Are dexterous fishers and they fish for men  
With dreams upon the hook.  
(OJE, p. 290).

Emer's jealousy grows, mainly when she is told that

A dream is body;  
The dead move ever towards a dreamless youth  
And when they dream no more return no more;  
And those more holy shades that never lived  
But visit you in dreams.  
(OJE, p. 290).

Her answer is bitter,

I know her sort.  
 They find our men asleep, weary with war,  
 Lap them in cloudy hair or kiss their lips;  
 Our men awake in ignorance of it all,  
 But when we take them in our arms at night  
 We cannot break their solitude.  
 (OJE, p. 290).

She is aware that dreams enchant men and make them long for moments of seclusion in which they can give themselves to the flights of their imagination and consciously achieve a state of trance. After they have experienced the power of dreams, they understand that the triviality of everyday life exclusively cannot satisfy them anymore since “the surface of life is not the sole reality.” (SKENE, 1974, p. 213). She realizes the Sidhe intends to fish for Cuchulain, becoming his ‘celestial wife.’<sup>8</sup> Then, she draws a knife to wound the spirit-woman, but is stopped by Bricriu, who wants her to see and hear more.

The scene that follows is particularly beautiful: as the crouching Ghost of Cuchulain slowly awakens, the Woman of the Sidhe whirls round him in a movement which grows quicker and quicker. Her dance suggests “a kind of spatial poetry, itself confused with enchantment. In Oriental theatre with its metaphysical tendencies, as compared with Western theatre with its psychological tendencies, forms assume their meaning and significance on all possible levels. Or if you like, their pulsating results are not inferred merely on one level but on all mental levels at once.” (ARTAUD, 1993, p. 54). String, flute and drum accompany her increasing gestures and dance

while she spreads fascination with the metallic suggestion of her mask, clothes and hair.

Fand seems to be “dancing a round dance (the classic form of the Ghost Dance),” (ELIADE, 1989, p. 311)<sup>9</sup> which even though not exclusively shamanic implies the use of shamanic techniques. The adepts of the Ghost-Dance Religion, “after long continued dancing and singing, fall into trance and visit the regions of the beyond, where they meet the souls of the dead, angels, and sometimes God himself.” (ELIADE, 1989, p. 143). Therefore, the speed of Fand’s dance suggests that she is in trance already, and she is in a region of the beyond, distracting the Ghost of Cuchulain and trying to guide him through the underworld.

The accompaniment by musical instruments marks the crescent rhythm of the power she exerts. The silvery costume she wears might hint at another essential element employed by the ecstatic dancers: the ‘ghost shirts,’ which are “ritual costumes with representations of stars, mythological beings, and even of visions obtained during trances.” (ELIADE, 1989, p. 322). In *Jealousy*, however, the colour of her garments does not represent the stars; it evokes the brilliance of the moon, perfect beauty and completeness of being which she is about to achieve with the help of Cuchulain.

The Ghost of Cuchulain and the Woman of the Sidhe talk for the first time. He admires her beauty, comparing her to the full moon; she says she is not complete yet, and seeing he is crouching, she asks,



What pulled your hands about your feet,  
 Pulled down your head upon your knees,  
 And hid your face?  
 (OJE, p. 291):

His reply is bitter,

Old memories:  
 A woman in her happy youth  
 Before her man had broken troth,  
 Dead men and women. Memories  
 Have pulled my head upon my knees.  
 (OJE, p. 291).

The suffering provoked by old memories is so strong that, in a kind of trance state, he crouches like an animal, apparently having changed his human form. Such an image reminds one that “the shaman can also change his own form into that of an animal [...], while the Druids, too, were credited with shape-shifting.” (RUTHERFORD, 1986, p. 58). According to Mircea ELIADE (1989, p. 93-94),

In appearance, this shamanic imitation of the actions and voices of animals can pass as ‘possession.’ But it would perhaps be more accurate to term it a *taking possession of his helping spirits by a shaman*. It is the shaman who *turns himself* into an animal, [which] symbolizes a real and direct connection with the beyond. [...] Each time a shaman succeeds in sharing in the animal mode of being, he in a manner re-establishes the situation that existed *in illo tempore*, in mythical times, when the divorce between man and the animal world had not yet occurred.

Fand seems to want Cuchulain to connect with a different reality and says he has loved women who could not reach beyond the human. She asks him to love her who lacks just an hour to be complete. Then he recognizes her,

I know you now, for long ago  
 I met you on a cloudy hill  
 Beside old thorn-trees and a well.  
 A woman danced and a hawk flew,  
 I held out arms and hands; but you,  
 That now seem friendly, fled away,  
 Half woman and half bird of prey.  
 (OJE, p. 292).

He knows she is Fand, the Guardian of the Hawk's Well. Both the dance of the woman and the flight of the hawk suggest a trance state as well as the contact between two different worlds. In the past, Cuchulain had also performed a ritual dance holding out arms and hands; the Woman of the Sidhe asks him to do that again, but he refuses to accept her for his memories weigh down his hands and embarrass his eyes. She insists,

Then kiss my mouth. Though memory  
Be beauty's bitterest enemy  
I have no dread, for at my kiss  
Memory on the moment vanishes:  
Nothing but beauty can remain.  
(OJE, p. 292).

Nevertheless, Cuchulain's "desire to enter in contact with the sacred is counteracted by the fear of being obliged to renounce the simple human condition and become a more or less pliant instrument for some manifestation of the sacred (gods, spirits, ancestors, etc.)." (ELIADE, 1989, p. 23). Fand promises him the freedom of oblivion. Through her kiss — which also hints at the shamanic use of suction — she intends to extract all the memories of Cuchulain's past life and give him the blessing of forgetfulness.

The kiss substitutes for the drink of forgetfulness that the Druids give Cuchulain in the legend. Fand's proposal to kiss the hero recalls "the well-known mythical theme of the meal that the feminine spirits of the beyond offer to every mortal who reaches their domain, in order that he shall forget his earthly life and remain forever in their power." (ELIADE, 1989, p. 77). Fand assumes the role of temptress, "a woman who tempts him [the shaman] with food. If wise, he does not

succumb, for the food, besides binding him to place, will also obliterate all memory of his past life.” (RUTHERFORD, 1986, p. 101). In the play, the motif of the kiss clearly stands for the temptation represented in shamanic ordeals.

Besides that, it corresponds to an initiation rite which implies the death and resurrection formula — and one of the possible steps within the initiation trial is the hypnotic sleep and the use of “drinks that make the candidate unconscious.” (ELIADE, 1989, p. 64). Cuchulain would have his memories washed out through Fand’s gentle touch, but he remembers Emer and turns away when he and the Sidhe are about to kiss.

Fand remarks,

Being among the dead you love her  
That valued every slut above her  
While you still lived.

.....  
But what could make you fit to wive  
With flesh and blood, being born to live  
Where no one speaks of broken troth,  
For all have washed out of their eyes  
Wind-blown dirt of their memories  
To improve their sight?  
(OJE, p. 293).

Her words cue for Cuchulain’s initiatory descent to the underworld. Among the dead, he has the possibility of rebirth and of a new life together with those who can see better for they are free from memories of mere humanity, recollections of flesh and blood. Then, the Ghost of Cuchulain strongly wishes to be healed and he cries for Fand’s mouth to suck old memories from his restless brain. Both leave the room and there follows a dialogue between Emer and the Figure of Cuchulain, who once more

insists she should renounce her husband's love whether she wanted to bring him back to life. He is emphatic,

Fool, fool!  
 I am Fand's enemy come to thwart her will,  
 And you stand gaping there. There is still time.  
 Hear how the horses trample on the shore,  
 Hear how they trample! She has mounted up.  
 Cuchulain's not beside her in the chariot.  
 There is still a moment left; cry out, cry out!  
 Renounce him, and her power is at an end.  
 Cuchulain's foot is on the chariot-step.  
 Cry —  
 (OJE, p. 294).

Bricriu knows they are about to have an ascensional flight in Fand's chariot and that the horses would lead them to regions unattainable to non-initiates. The motifs of celestial ascent and riding through the air also indicate a shamanic ordeal. According to ELIADE (1989, p. 329), among the Araucanians, "after invoking the help and protection of God and the dead *machi*, the shamaness announces that 'she is about to mount on horseback with her helpers, the invisible *machi*.'" In the play, however, it is Cuchulain who is about to mount beside the Sidhe, who is his helper. Besides that, "the 'horse' enables the shaman to fly through the air, to reach the heavens. The dominant aspect of the mythology of the horse is not infernal but funerary; the horse is a mythical image of death and hence is incorporated into the ideologies and techniques of ecstasy. The horse carries the deceased into the beyond; it produces the 'break-through in plane,' the passage from this world to other worlds." (ELIADE, 1989, p. 467).

The changeling's words create great tension. Emer becomes aware she is supposed to make a tragic choice. It is interesting to observe that she is the one who

will assume the role of shamaness and try to rescue Cuchulain's soul. Bricriu determines what sacrifice she must make and the power he has given her to hear and see beyond the ordinary reality makes her share the power of a real shaman,

for only he 'sees' the spirits and knows how to exorcise them; only he recognizes that the soul has fled, and is able to overtake it, in ecstasy, and return it to its body. Often the cure involves various sacrifices, and it is always the shaman who decides if they are needed and what form they shall take; the recovery of physical health is closely dependent on restoring the balance of spiritual forces, for it is often the case that the illness is due to a neglect or an omission in respect to the infernal powers, which also belong to the sphere of the sacred. (ELIADE, 1989, p. 216).

Like a real shamaness, Emer "goes in search of the patient's fugitive soul, captures it, and makes it return to animate the body that it has left." (ELIADE, 1989, p. 182). She decides to surrender her hope and, with great intensity and dramatic impact, renounces Cuchulain's love for ever.

The tragic irony of Emer's decision lies in the fact that Eithne Inguba comes in and believes to have been the responsible for summoning back Cuchulain, who wakes and calls for her,

Your arms, your arms! O Eithne Inguba,  
I have been in some strange place and am afraid.  
(OJE, p. 294).

When he comes back, it is as if he woke up from a long sleep; he acknowledges to have been to a different place and tells Eithne Inguba the sensation he has. The simple detail of his return from the underworld and the narration of his descent is also one of the formulas employed by the shaman when he leaves the trance state and awakens to reality; he returns and "tells the audience the results of his journey," (ELIADE, 1989, p. 201) exactly as Cuchulain does, thus confirming his ecstatic experience to be one of the shamanic type.

After that, the Musicians come back to the stage and resume the ritual of the folding and unfolding of the cloth,

He that has loved the best  
May turn from a statue  
His too human breast.  
(OJE, p. 295).

Their rhymes refer to Fand and Cuchulain, who leaves her world and “returns with relief to ‘mere’ humanity,” (ZWERDLING, 1965, p. 165). In fact, I think Cuchulain’s return from the otherworld means that he has successfully undergone an initiatory ordeal. His body comes back to life; however, like Fand, he also lacks something to be complete. His *separation* from society and descent to her world were relevant steps within his initiatory pattern; he faced a process of *initiation*; now it is time for him to *return* and assign his boon to society for “when the hero-quest has been accomplished, [...] the adventurer still must return with his life-transmuting trophy. The full round, the norm of the monomyth, requires that the hero shall now begin the labor of [...] renewing the community, the nation, the planet, or the ten thousand worlds.” (CAMPBELL, 1973, p. 193).

Cuchulain comes back much stronger and certainly ready to face the final battle, which takes place in the last play of the cycle, **The Death of Cuchulain**.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Yoshinobu INOURA and Toshio KAWATAKE (1981, p. 115) state that “Noh masks have always been regarded as something more than mere equivalents of makeup and been credited with spiritual, mystic significance.”

<sup>2</sup> YEATS’s skill to adapt theatrical devices is superb; through the Musicians, that certainly remind us of the Greek chorus, he shows his supreme and “consciente arte de plasmar o invisível no visível, o musical no plástico, o poético no cênico, o dramático no teatral, em figuras individualizadas e nomeadas como personagens de desenho inteiramente estético e, no entanto, de pulsação ainda essencialmente mítica. O próprio coro se faz *persona*.” (GUINSBURG, *apud* NIETZSCHE, 1992, p. 162).

<sup>3</sup> YEATS, William. B. **The Only Jealousy of Emer**. In: \_\_\_\_\_. **The collected plays of W. B. Yeats**. p. 281-296.

All references from the play will be taken from this edition, hereafter cited in the text in parenthesis as **OJE**, followed by indication concerning page number.

<sup>4</sup> In **A Vision**, YEATS (1977, p. 81) develops an ontological system whose main symbol is the Great Wheel, which stands for “every completed movement of thought or life, twenty-eight incarnations, a single incarnation, a single judgement or act of thought.” Coincidentally or not, it can also be interpreted as a means of ecstatic flights; but “probably the original vehicle [for the flights] was the shamanic drum, later replaced by the wheel, which is a Buddhist symbol.” (ELIADE, 1989, p. 433). The close interrelation of shamanic elements, Buddhism (which is a source of the Noh theatre), and Yeats’s own visionary system should be observed.

<sup>5</sup> This idea is complemented by KALWEIT (1992, p. 239), who says that the caves “constituyen lugares para refugiarse y guarecerse, y, en el fondo, son lugares misteriosos, en realidad una expresión del sí mismo. Aquí el chamán, rodeado de paredes desnudas y aislado de la vida alborotada y el afán egoísta del mundo, encuentra su sí mismo más íntimo y supremo. Se une a las corrientes telúricas a través del manantial subterráneo, las venas y arterias de nuestro planeta, y deja que estas energías fluyan a través de él.”

<sup>6</sup> According to JUNG (1975, p. 135-136), “Anyone who gets into that cave, that is to say into the cave which everyone has in himself, or into the darkness that lies behind consciousness, will find himself involved in an — at first — unconscious process of transformation. By penetrating into the unconscious he makes a connection with his unconscious contents.”

<sup>7</sup> Ward RUTHERFORD (1986, p. 55) asserts that “soul-loss comes about because the link between the mortal and immortal parts is easily broken. When rupture occurs the disembodied soul (like the shaman’s in trance) wanders abroad, as also happens in sleep, for instance, or when someone is unconscious. Like any wanderer, the errant soul can get lost, and the body, thus deprived, sickens. [...] But the journeying soul can suffer worse fates than losing its way. It is highly vulnerable to the machinations of ill-disposed spirits and can, as it were, be kidnapped.”

<sup>8</sup> “The shaman is assisted in his labours not only by his celestial wife but also by feminine spirits [...] who confer [...] magical powers on the shaman.” (ELIADE, 1989, p. 77).

<sup>9</sup> “A number of shamanic elements are also preserved in the great mystical movements known as the Ghost-Dance Religion [...]. Its prophets had their visions in the purest archaic style; they ‘died’ and ascended to the sky and there a celestial woman taught them how to approach the ‘Master of Life’; they received their great revelations in trances during which they journeyed through the beyond, and, after returning to normal consciousness, they told what they had seen.” (ELIADE, 1989, p. 320).



## 6 THE DEATH OF CUCHULAIN: the dance of regeneration

*Truly the blessed gods have proclaimed  
a most beautiful secret:  
Death comes not as a curse, but as a  
blessing to men.*  
*Eleusinian epitaph*

Written in 1939 and not revised before Yeats's passing, **The Death of Cuchulain** is the last of the sequence of five plays which portray the life and accomplishments of the legendary hero. The plot incidents are extracted mainly from "The Great Gathering of Muirthemne" and "Death of Cuchulain," both found in Lady Gregory's **Cuchulain of Muirthemne**. There follows a brief summary of the legend, which gives an account of the main details of the hero's death.

In Muirthemne, Cuchulain does not wait for his fellows and fights alone against his enemies after having fallen victim of a shape-changing spell.<sup>1</sup> One of the three daughters of Calatin (a king he had killed in battle) changes her own shape and takes the appearance of a crow to deceive him. His friends and Cathbad, the Druid, discover the enchantment and succeed in keeping him safe. Yet, Badb (Calatin's daughter) puts on herself the semblance of Niamh (Cuchulain's lover) and sets him free from the promise he had previously made of not facing his enemies while Conall

did not come to his help. Free from the oath, he goes to the field to meet the opposing army. He refuses to wait for support and says,

I would not give up my great name and my courage for all the riches of the world [...] for a great name outlasts life.[...] And if you are sorry and loth to let me go into the fight, I am glad and ready enough to go into it, though I know as well as you yourself I must fall in it. Do not be hindering me any more, then, for if I stay or if I go, death will meet me all the same. (GREGORY, 1979, p. 252-253).

His statement seems to be heavily based on the druidical doctrine pointed out by the Roman Emperor Julius CAESAR (1943, p. 146)<sup>2</sup>, according to which the soul does not come to an end, but passes from one body to another. The druids think that this is the best stimulus to bravery, because it teaches men to ignore the terrors of death. Cuchulain faces his coming death as a natural process which would only take him to a different mode of being, while his deeds and his name would outlive him and defy time.

The Little Hound faces his destiny and is deadly wounded; he goes down to the lake, drinks from it and washes himself; then, he sees a pillar-stone, "His eyes lit on it, and he went to the pillar-stone, and "he would not meet his death lying down, but would meet it standing up." (GREGORY, 1979, p. 256).

At the time of his death while tied to the pillar-stone, a bird comes and settles on his shoulder. One of his enemies comments, 'It is not on that pillar birds were used to settle'. (GREGORY, 1979, p. 256). This statement might stand for Cuchulain's final shape-changing and consummate transformation. According to the shamanic mythology,

the birds perched on the branches of the World Tree represent men's souls. Because shamans can change themselves into 'birds,' that is, because they enjoy the 'spirit'

condition, they are able to fly to the World Tree to bring back 'soul-birds.' The bird perched on a stick is a frequent symbol in shamanic circles. (ELIADE, 1989, p. 480-481).

After the foe's remark, Cuchulain is beheaded and has his hand cut off, a ritual which retraces the initiation ceremony of dismemberment.

The Hound's death is avenged by Conall, who lays the head together with the body. Emer takes the head in her hands, washes it and puts a silk cloth round it. She laments his slaughter and asks to be buried by his side. Then, her life goes out of her and the whole Ulster starts to lament over the death of the heroic couple. "But the three times fifty queens that loved Cuchulain saw him appear in his Druid chariot<sup>3</sup>, going through Emain Macha; and they could hear him singing the music of the Sidhe." (GREGORY, 1979, p. 263).

One cannot help noticing the beauty and poetry of this passage. Undoubtedly, Lady Gregory has captured the feeling and emotion of the Celtic soul. The fact that Cuchulain's lovers see him after his death emphasizes the druidical belief in the existence of different spheres or realms which, in reality, are *one*. Besides, it also recalls the ancient belief in the power and sacredness of music. Ancient peoples believed in the healing properties of music, and the shamans were also healing specialists who possessed their own magical song.<sup>4</sup> Cuchulain sings the music of the Sidhe; therefore, one realizes he has acquired his song of power and already participates in the sacred.

Even briefly retold, it is possible to observe in the legend details that hint at an initiatory atmosphere.<sup>5</sup> The saga serves as a basis for **The Death of Cuchulain**; nevertheless, as in the other plays, Yeats made some alterations to suit his own ends.

In the play, there is a prologue introduced by a very old man, who seems to have come out of mythology. After his fierce introductory words, Eithne Inguba enters, acting as a substitute for Niamh, who is Cuchulain's lover in the legend. She bids the hero ride out and fight, even though his death might come out of it. Then, he reads a letter she holds in her hand, in which Emer advises him to stay and wait for Conall's help. Eithne thinks Maeve has put the words in her mouth to deceive Cuchulain and send him to his death. But she also accuses him of not having anymore the passion necessary to reach fullness of being in life.

Their conversation is interrupted by a servant, who announces the horse is bitted. The stage darkens. After that, Cuchulain enters wounded and makes an effort to fasten himself to a pillar-stone with his own belt. Aoife, who has come to avenge the death of their son on Baile's Strand, attaches him to the menhir.

Cuchulain tells her how he was fated to kill the young man. Next, someone approaches and Aoife hides not to be seen. The stranger is the Blind Man, who was present at Baile's Strand when the hero went mad. He tells Cuchulain that Queen Maeve has offered him twelve pennies to strike his head off.

At this point, Cuchulain sees the feathered shape his soul will take after death. The stage darkens once more and he is beheaded by the sightless man. The curtain rises again to show the Morrighu holding a black parallelogram, which represents the hero's head. Stylization marks the influence of the Noh theatre in Yeats's plays. Instead of "the realistic props found in some Western theatres (fountains with real water, doors that slam with a convincing bang), the props for Noh are seldom more than

outlines of the objects suggested.” (KEENE, 1975, p. 23). Yeats employs stylization not to deviate the audience’s attention from the action itself. The stage props are not supposed to convince the spectators, but to help create the illusion of a particular place or atmosphere. The Morrighu leaves and Emer starts a dance; then, she stops and some bird notes are heard. The play ends with the song of a Street-Singer, who sings the music of some Irish Fair of the present day.

After the abbreviated summary of the legend and plot of the play, there follows an analysis of **The Death of Cuchulain**, which will confirm the completion of his initiation and unity of being. The stage-directions indicate a bare stage and a very old man introduces the prologue. Following the Noh aesthetics, “the stage offers nothing to distract the audience, certainly nothing in the nature of the facile realism of representational theatres.” (KEENE, 1975, p. 87). Yeats’s use of the Noh conveys the timelessness in art as well as in life or in the history of mankind. The bare stage of any period<sup>6</sup> opens up a great possibility of interpretations. Not defining the age and at the same time employing a character who looks like someone out of mythology, the author does not limit or circumscribe the sphere of the play. Non-mimetic *par excellence*, its content may refer to all ages, all societies, all religious sects, all folklore, all traditions.

From the very beginning, the play discloses an initiatory ordeal. The symbolic stage and the lack of props recall an initiatory scenario in which the search for a spiritual path is the most relevant. The absence of realia inherent to the living world implies the acceptance of a different reality, maybe not seen at first sight.

The first character to appear is the old man, who seems to belong to a mythic era; he is visibly disquieted and completely abominates the vile age he lives in. He justifies the series of plays which have for theme Cuchulain's life and death and, in the same way as in the Noh plays and the Greek theatre, he presupposes the audience's previous knowledge of the saga, clearly assuming the role of Yeats's spokesman. His intentions can be compared to those of the compiler of the **Konjaku**, a collection of material on the history of Buddhism. As stated by IKEDA (1979, p. 183), "the compiler was not motivated simply by nostalgia for the past or antiquarianism in his efforts to gather together a systematic compilation of records or historical materials. His historical consciousness is founded upon an intense concern for the age in which he himself was living and a desire to understand its problems."

Yeats's desire to arouse a nationalistic feeling in people so as to make them cherish the idea of their country as a nation which should firmly establish its own identity makes him look back into the heroic past of this country to search for the sources of this work. In this sense, when he chooses Cuchulain as the central character of his plays, he not only respects the present but also tries to rescue the cultural inheritance where the roots of the nation can be located. The scene is thus set in Ireland. The odds the hero faces are exemplary actions supposed to encourage his countrymen to fight for their ideals and try to restore the order and a spiritual discipline that seems to be lost. He tries to stir heat to their blood and to incentivate the struggle, which is the dynamic principle that makes the wheel of life go round and round.

Eithne urges her lover to combat; her instructions are plain,

You must not linger here in sloth,

.....  
 No matter what's the odds, no matter though  
 Your death may come of it, ride out and fight  
 The scene is set and you must out and fight.  
 (DC, p. 695).<sup>7</sup>

Emer, on the other hand, advises Cuchulain to postpone the battle saying that she has sent Eithne to be his bedfellow in order to be sure he would not take up arms without the support of his companions. She has not realized Cuchulain's inward growth; his "personal desires, sexual stereotypes and worldly values have not been rejected (as [he has] experienced the cycles of such activities) but have been outgrown." (STEWART, 1987, p. 188).

Cuchulain says he prefers Eithne's unwritten words; yet, he does not believe her when she affirms Maeve has put her in a trance state. Eithne insists she feels the presence of the Morrighu, whose black wing touches her shoulder. Cuchulain argues the woman headed like a crow was not monstrous when he met her as a boy and accuses Eithne of trying to get rid of him,

you thought that if you changed I'd kill you for it,  
 When everything sublunary must change,  
 And if I have not changed that goes to prove  
 That I am monstrous.

EITHNE - You're not the man I loved,  
 That violent man forgave no treachery.  
 If, thinking what you think, you can forgive,  
 It is because you are about to die.  
 (DC, p. 697).

Actually, a time for regeneration has come. When he clearly admits that everything which is terrestrial or worldly must change, she recognizes — or rather

doesn't recognize — the old Cuchulain; she is suddenly aware that the moment is crucial and if he can forgive, it is because he is close to death. She accuses him of having lost the ability to live passionately; she fails to perceive that he is crossing a border line, leaving the “sea of passions”<sup>8</sup> behind him and getting closer to an authentic balance. He starts accepting life in all its painful possibilities. He feels to be integrated to the turning wheel of life, and to belong to a powerful reality that is the Cosmos itself. In the eastern tradition, specifically

in Taoism, Reality is termed Tao, a word which has no real translation [...]. Tao is life sensed as a flowing movement, a power like the wind or water. It is sometimes termed ‘the way of things’ and one who is in accord with it is said to be in a state of Te, or grace. [...] As in Buddhism, all evil actions and all suffering are thought to stem from man’s belief in himself as separate from Tao; from his aggressiveness and ego-assertiveness; and from his incessant desire to possess life, particularly in the fixed forms of concepts and ideas. If man could realize that he is at one with the fullness of life, if he could cease from aggressive ego-assertion and let go of his grasp of his own life, then life or Tao would be able to operate freely within him. His life would be lived not by the dictation of his own ego but by Tao. (BANCROFT, 1979, p. 8-9).<sup>9</sup>

Cuchulain loses his aggressiveness and, little by little, surrenders to the flowing movement of life. He is getting closer to his Tao. Even though not reluctant to face his destiny, he answers Eithne’s remarks with these words,

Spoken too loud and too near the door;  
 Speak low if you would speak about my death,  
 Or not in that strange voice exulting in it.  
 Who knows what ears listen behind the door ?  
 (DC, p. 697).

He seems to be aware of the actuality of a different reality, of a dimension pulsating ‘behind the door,’ of a plane of existence not commonly felt by those who are far from achieving supreme *oneness*. He realizes the door might be the passage between two states, two worlds, between the known and the unknown, light and darkness. The opening also has a dynamic, psychological value: it not only indicates a passage, but



invites to cross it. And most of the times, in the symbolic sense, this is the transition from the profane to the domain of the sacred. The door opens up to revelation and is the symbol of the possibility of access to a superior reality. (CHEVALIER, 1989, p. 734-736).

The Servant interrupts Cuchulain's conversation with Eithne to announce the great horse is bitted. The hero asks him how he should act in relation to Eithne and the suggestion the subordinate gives is to make her swallow poppy-juice. As it is known, poppy is a flower from which opium can be extracted. The drinking of the beverage would lead her to a semitrance, a fact that might be a subtle suggestion about the use of narcotics so widely spread in late shamanism. Once more she professes that the great hero is about to die.

Suddenly, there is the sound of pipe and drum; the stage grows dark and when it lights up again, it is empty. Wounded, Cuchulain tries to fasten himself to a pillar stone with his belt. In Japan, "the mast and the tree are still believed today to be the 'road to the gods.'" (ELIADE, 1989, p. 285). Besides that, the stone is considered "the symbol of the immortal self." (JUNG, 1975, p. 140). Adding to the symbolism of immortality, the pillar-stone also corresponds to the World Tree, whose sacred place constitutes the center of the earth or *omphalos*, the earth's umbilicus. Like the human navel, these stones represent the sustentation point, but in a metaphysical sense. They are related to the maintenance of the earth's health and of the spiritual life of the people. Typically, they used to mark places where there was communication with the

spirit of the world and they are a version of the Cosmic Axis, which is an essential element in the shamanic traditions. (DEVEREUX, 1993, p. 112, 184).

For the Celts, the menhir is both the phallic symbol, evoking the divine virility for its demiurgic work (of which the Universe is the concrete proof), as well as the luminous symbol which recalls the Morning light. (AMBELAIN, 1991, p. 38-39).<sup>10</sup>

As the World Tree,

it represents the universe in continual regeneration, the inexhaustible spring of cosmic life, the paramount reservoir of the sacred; [...] the Cosmic Tree, expressing the sacrality of the world, its fertility and perennality, is related to the ideas of creation, fecundity, and initiation, and finally to the idea of absolute reality and immortality. Thus the World Tree becomes a Tree of Life and Immortality as well. Enriched by innumerable mythical doublets and complementary symbols, the Cosmic Tree always presents itself as the very reservoir of life and the master of destinies. (ELIADE, 1989, p. 271).

The use of the belt and the veil<sup>11</sup> to fasten Cuchulain's body to the pillar-stone is also relevant. Ascensional symbols, they are mere variants of the rope and the ladder which necessarily imply "communication between sky and earth. It is by means of a rope or a ladder [...] that the gods descend to earth and men go up to the sky." (ELIADE, 1989, p. 430).<sup>12</sup> In some Tibetan Buddhist traditions, the rope and ladder were replaced by the rope of divination, a symbol which survives in the piece of cloth (Aoife's veil) that "represents the bridge over which the soul passes to the realm of the gods. All these features are an integral part of the shamanic complex of ascent and soul-guiding." (ELIADE, 1989, p. 431).

According to ELIADE (1989, p. 33), "all the ecstatic experiences that determine the future shaman's vocation involve the traditional schema of an initiation ceremony: suffering, death, resurrection." Cuchulain's physical sufferings recall an

initiatory death. As stated by KALWEIT, if we were able to understand illnesses and sufferings as processes of physical and psychic transformation, we would have a deeper and less partial view of the psychosomatic and psychospiritual processes and we could learn from the numerous opportunities which the suffering and death of the ego present. However, “el sufrimiento psíquico y físico han pasado desapercibidos como medios para alterar la consciencia y como fuerzas y mecanismos de transformación y auto-curación.” (KALWEIT, 1992, p. 99-100).

On the verge of losing consciousness, Cuchulain asks Aoife where he is and what he is doing there; he seems to realize the time has come for him to meet the divinity and participate in a different reality. He desires to die upon his feet. The vertical position he wants his body to assume is the reflection of the internal disposition of all his psychic life and soul. The external appearance corresponds to the spiritual rectitude he is determined to achieve. According to some texts written by the Egyptians to explain the ceremony of the rising of the Zed (the pillar consecrated to Osiris), the erect posture is the characteristic which establishes the separation between man and the animals, between the being that is despoiled of the *élan vital* and the one that is part of it. The pillar symbolizes the descent of the Spiritual Principle upon matter, the ray which vertically links the human heart with the Zodiacal Heart in a continuous exchange of receptive coming and going. (MATZENBACHER, 1985, p. 95).<sup>13</sup> Cuchulain's heart is bound to be linked with the cosmos. Spiritually alert, he intends to be attached to the pillar-stone to lay hold of and control the experiences and

inner phenomena which will take place during his psychic transformation and ultimate connection with the Cosmos.

Aoife tells Cuchulain it was not Maeve who let her get close to him. She says,

Her army did not part to let me through.  
 The grey of Macha, that great horse of yours  
 Killed in the battle, came out of the pool  
 As though it were alive, and went three times  
 In a great circle round you and that stone,  
 Then leaped into the pool; and not a man  
 Of all that terrified army dare approach,  
 But I approach.  
 (DC, p. 699-700).

Her speech is rich in symbols. She alludes to the grey of Macha revealing the Celtic worship for horses. In addition, the close relation between Cuchulain and his horse can also hint at the magico-religious rapport which involve the shaman and this powerful animal.<sup>14</sup>

For three times, the horse makes a circle round Cuchulain.<sup>15</sup> DRURY (1987, p. 38) affirms that

The Circle incorporates many symbolic meanings but most importantly it represents the Infinite Godhead, the Alpha and Omega, the Divine Self-Knowledge which the magician aspires to. As a symbol of what he may become the Circle symbolises the process of invocation, a reaching towards a higher spiritual reality. By standing in the centre of the Circle, the magician [in this case, Cuchulain] is able to identify with the source of Creation, and consequently his Will ensures that the 'ego-devils' or his lesser self remain outside the 'sphere' of higher consciousness.

In the centre of this mandala<sup>16</sup>, Cuchulain is magically protected. As stated by JUNG, the evident aim of the image (the circle) is to trace a *sulcus primigenius*, a magic furrow round the centre, which is the temple or *temenos* (sacred area) of the most intimate personality, to avoid a possible outflow or to preserve it from an eventual distraction due to external circumstances. This internal sacred area contains

the unity of life and consciousness, formerly possessed, then lost, and found again. The unity of life and consciousness is Tao. Within the circle, Tao assumes the direction. Action changes into non-action; everything that is peripheral is subordinated to the order that comes from the centre. (JUNG; WILHELM, 1984, p. 40-41).

In the centre of the circle and fastened to the pillar-stone, Cuchulain's body is motionless. Yet, he emanates such a life-force that none of his enemies dare approach. He does not show any outward action; however, beneath his seeming stillness there is a contemplative state in which internal action surpasses all external movement. Action and non-action (or contemplation), then, are not real opposites; they complement each other as the two poles of the universal manifestation, namely *yang* and *yin*.

In primordial times, man had in himself an equilibrium concerning the complementing principles of *yin* and *yang*. Modern man, in consequence of a spiritual degeneration, has lost this balance. Cuchulain has always performed great deeds and been a man of action, but the time has come for him to try and reconcile both forces. At the *axis mundi*, he can escape from the turning movement of the wheel of life and get to a balance.

In the next scene, Aoife wants to know about Cuchulain's fight with her son on Baile's Strand; he says he wanted to avoid the contention because the boy resembled her; nevertheless, due to the oath to obey Conchubar's commands, he had to face him. Furthermore, acting against his intuition and rejecting his spontaneous

fondness for the lad, he accepted the suggestion that the semblance was the product of witchcraft and killed the young man. Then, he went mad and fought against the sea.<sup>17</sup>

While Cuchulain's speech recalls the main actions in **On Baile's Strand**, Aoife's alludes to facts that are supposed to have happened offstage in **At the Hawk's Well**, after Cuchulain left the spring to fight the fierce women of the hills. She states,

I seemed invulnerable; you took my sword,  
You threw me on the ground and left me there.  
I searched the mountain for your sleeping-place  
And laid my virgin body at your side,  
And yet, because you had left me, hated you,  
And thought that I would kill you in your sleep,  
And yet begot a son that night between  
Two black thorn-trees.  
(DC, p. 700-701).<sup>18</sup>

When he replies he cannot understand, she positively asserts he is about to die. At this moment, the Blind Man of **On Baile's Strand** comes in; she hides to keep out of his sight.

The Blind Man arrives and makes clear he had been offered some money to behead Cuchulain. "He is, in fact, the arch-materialist, having agreed to kill Cuchulain for twelve pennies. His murder of the hero [epitomizes] the demise of the heroic ideal itself at the hands of pragmatic sanction." (FRIEDMAN, 1971, p. 317). Cuchulain ironically says that twelve pennies are a good reason for killing a man. His bitter remark alludes to Yeats's revolt and irony against the materialistic society he lives in; however, if everybody is not satisfied with the exclusively material development of modern civilization, it might be a sign that there is still some hope for salvation. This scene recalls the passage in which Judas betrays Christ for thirty coins. Therefore, a parallel can be traced between Cuchulain, the hero, and Jesus, the saviour. Both try to

save people and recover a state of integrity which is lost. Their intention is to restore the conditions that existed *ab origine* and give men the opportunity to share a sacralized world once more.

Cuchulain feels a certain religious nostalgia that expresses “*the desire to live in a pure and holy cosmos, as it was in the beginning, when it came fresh from the Creator’s hands.*” (ELIADE, 1959, p. 65). His role is that of a saviour who intends to give dignity back to his people. His heroic deeds and suffering are an attempt to establish a pattern of exemplary behaviour to be followed by his countrymen. He tries to rescue the tradition that existed in *illo tempore*, a time in which man lived in a state of *oneness* with a sacralized Cosmos.

Even before his death, Cuchulain’s psychic dismemberment brings him an enlightened mind, intensified perception, greater capacity to feel compassion and true kindness towards all fellow-creatures.<sup>19</sup> It seems that only suffering stimulates the true tolerance and the genuine compassion. He seems to be willing to be dismembered and, consequently, to abandon his previous human nature. (KALWEIT, 1992, p. 125,130). Resigned, he is ready to face the last battle, whose pattern, on a religious level, is that of

the Crucifixion and the attendant death, descent into Hell and final spiritual elevation of Jesus. Within the individual it manifests as a powerful transformation of the psychic-body complexity, the total entity that comprises a human being. This is the traditional ‘living death’ of the initiate into the Mysteries, a transformation in which a spiritual rebirth is undertaken while still alive within the physical or consensual world, rather than after physical death. (STEWART, 1987, p. 182-183).

On the process of transformation, Cuchulain has a mystical vision in which he transcends the human condition. While describing it he says,

There floats out there  
 The shape that I shall take when I am dead,  
 My soul's first shape, a soft feathery shape,  
 And is not that a strange shape for the soul  
 Of a great fighting man?  
 (DC, p. 702).

The ascensional symbolism his words display can be easily detected. His soul's assuming the shape of a bird hints at some initiation rituals in which the candidate's "soul is transformed into a bird." (ELIADE, 1989, p. 38). Besides that, in some Celtic sagas, it is generally in bird-shape that the Tuatha de Danann (the brave ancient race that shared a sacred condition and that became invisible) come to escort the few elects to their underground residences. (ÉVOLA, 1988, p. 103). The great warrior is bound to achieve the spirit condition and get in contact with the ancient people who lived *in illo tempore*, rescuing the traditional values that seem to be lost.

Cuchulain's vision can be interpreted in two different levels,

on the plane of mystical experience there is an 'ecstasy' and hence the flight of the soul [...]; on the metaphysical plane there is abolition of the conditioned world. But both the meanings of the [...] flight express a break in ontological level and passage from one mode of being to another, or, more precisely, passage from conditioned existence to an unconditioned mode of being, that is, to perfect freedom. (ELIADE, 1959, p. 175-176).

In this sense, the hero's initiatory ordeal is "a labor not of attainment but of reattainment, not discovery but rediscovery. The godly powers sought and dangerously won are revealed to have been within the heart of the hero all the time." (CAMPBELL, 1973, p. 39).

Right after his mystical sighting the great warrior is finally beheaded<sup>20</sup>, a rite that recalls initiatory ceremonies<sup>21</sup> in which "the neophyte's body is magically opened to give him a new set of inner organs and cause his 'rebirth.'" (ELIADE, 1989,



p. 330). Before dying, Cuchulain seems to be certain about his mystical rebirth; he embodies “an outstanding instance of that Celtic paradox, the physical defeat from whose ashes spiritual victory rises like a phoenix.” (ARMSTRONG, 1970, p. 12).

Once more, there is music of pipe and drum. The Morrighu holds Cuchulain’s head, actually a black parallelogram, and there are six other parallelograms, the heads of those who gave the hero six mortal wounds. She says the dead can hear her and to the dead she speaks. It shows the sacred aspect of “the Morrigan, or Great Queen, who fought against the hero Cu Chulainn by means of constant shape-shifting. The Morrigan was maiden, bride and crone as occasion demanded, and presided over birth and death.” (BANCROFT, 1987, p. 96). In **The Death of Cuchulain**, she presides over the hero’s death and arranges the dance.

Emer appears for the first time and starts the dance of the severed heads<sup>22</sup>, revolving three times round the circle of the skulls.<sup>23</sup> Then, she moves towards the head of Cuchulain and is about to prostrate herself as if in adoration or triumph when she hears some bird notes.<sup>24</sup> At the moment the bird sings, Cuchulain has already suffered the ultimate “transformation common to all things.” (RAWSON; LEGEZA, 1984, p. 32). At the *axis mundi*, he performs the break-through in plane that leads him to a different mode of being. Reintegrated to the Cosmos as if he were in *illud tempus*, he reestablishes the order in his world, a fact that is confirmed by the soft bird notes that can be interpreted as his reattunement and ultimate harmony with the wide world.<sup>25</sup>

After Emer's dance, the stage darkens slowly. Then comes the loud music of some Irish Fair of our day. When the lights come up again, the three musicians, in ragged street-singers' clothes, start to pipe and drum. One of them sings a song in which a prostitute praises the mythical time and the ancient race it produced. She recollects what centuries have passed since they were living men, and shows the impoverishment of the present age in terms of spiritual values. Then, referring to the heroes of the present time she asks,

What stood in the Post Office  
 With Pearse and Connolly ?  
 What comes out of the mountain  
 Where men first shed their blood ?  
 Who thought Cuchulain till it seemed  
 He stood where they had stood ?

.....  
 A statue's there to mark the place,  
 By Oliver Sheppard done.  
 (DC, p. 704-705).

At first, her tone seems to be pessimistic when she describes the Irish heroes as the exemplary paradigm for the unheroic age she lives in. However, her speech assumes a positive connotation when she states Cuchulain was the one who stood in the Post Office with Pearse and Connolly and incentivated them — as well as the whole nation — to fight for their ideals.

This recalls the fact that Yeats was “especially delighted by the story that some of the men who fought at the Post Office in 1916 ‘had the Irish legendary hero Cuchulain so much in their minds.’ Here was a modern heroic event which accepted as its model the Irish heroic past that Yeats had been trying so steadily to recreate for his own generation.” (ZWERDLING, 1965, p. 107). The great hero was the one who

first shed his blood on the mountain (a symbol for the *axis mundi*) in an attempt to induce his fellowmen to struggle and try to find the unity that they had lost.

Cuchulain's sacrifice in a way recalls the theme of the wounded king who, in an inaccessible and mysterious place, waits to be restored to health so that he can "return." (ÉVOLA, 1988, p. 36). His boon to society is finally delivered in the form of tenacity and stimulus to bravery.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, "the participation of the community can also take place in the following way: there is no apotheosis of the initiate, but the sacred action is recited, and then, in the course of long periods of time, psychic changes gradually occur in the individual participants," (JUNG, 1975, p. 130) leading them to action. The statue is the homage paid Cuchulain for his valour as a redeemer; he is the one who faced destiny and underwent all the possible changes to get to a real unity of being. Through hard struggle he abolished all the limits of his personality, achieving a state of *oneness* with the universe.

Attached to the pillar-stone, Cuchulain mediated between the sky and earth. As it is known, the ultimate aim of initiation is to restore the primordial state. If initiation really takes place, man is led from his present decentralized condition to the central situation in which the perfection of the human state is achieved. In this central position, man escapes from the cosmic wheel since the centre does not participate in the movement of the wheel, but is the fixed and motionless point round which this movement is performed. (GUÉNON, 1990, p. 64). After having experienced all the steps of an initiatory ordeal, Cuchulain is finally tied to the pillar-stone. In this axial position, he gets to the end of his personal quest and achieves supreme initiation. Thus

it becomes apparent that man can overcome the fragmentation of the present times and he himself reactualize the *illud tempus* in which *unity* was the ruling principle.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Shape-changing, a shamanic element, is indeed represented in early tales, poems or sagas all over the world. The Celtic lore is rich in examples of that kind, and the legend of Cuchulain displays some fragments which undoubtedly recall a shamanic background.

<sup>2</sup> In his **Comentarios de la Guerra de las Galias**, Julius CAESAR (1943, p. 146) asseverates that the Druids “esméranse sobre todo en persuadir la inmortalidad de las almas y su transmigración de unos cuerpos a otros, cuya creencia juzgan ser grandísimo incentivo para el valor, poniendo aparte el temor de la muerte. Otras muchas cosas disputan y enseñan a la juventud acerca de los astros y su movimiento, de la magnitud del orbe terrestre, de la naturaleza de las cosas, del poder y soberanía de los dioses inmortales.”

<sup>3</sup> Discussing the symbolism of the chief in his chariot, René GUÉNON (1990, p. 93,141) asserts that the “cosmic chariot” was built according to a cosmic model: its roof represented the Sky and its floor represented the Earth. Therefore, the chief was identified with the *axis mundi* so that he could link both the Sky and the Earth.

In this case, in his Druid chariot Cuchulain is the one who, having conquered a central position, stands for the pillar or vertical bridge that makes the connection between both realms possible.

<sup>4</sup> For further information about the use of music as an element of magical cure I suggest the reading of STEWART, R. J. **The mystic life of Merlin**, chap. 4-5; and TAME, David. **O poder oculto da música**.

For the use of music by the shamans, the reading of HARNER, Michael. **O caminho do xamã**, chap. 5, and STEVENS, Jose; STEVENS, Lena S. **Os segredos do xamanismo** would be advisable.

<sup>5</sup> Besides the shape-shifting of Calatin’s daughter and the hard trial they impose on Cuchulain, he really intends to face destiny and make the solitary journey which would show him the unknown path. Wounded, he attaches his body to a pillar-stone (symbolic of the conjunction of the three worlds) and waits for the coming death. A bird (symbol of a spiritual ascent) settles on his shoulder and he has both his head and hand struck off, rituals which undoubtedly display the initiatory ordeal the Hound lived through.

The symbolism of the pillar-stone, the bird and the ritual dismemberment will be dealt with in details during the analysis of the play.

<sup>6</sup> The omission of unnecessary details confirms Yeats's desire "to show the universality of the figures in the religious experience. In moments of intense passion, he contended, we are not aware of character. Attention to surface detail draws us away from inner reality. It puts a barrier between us and the ecstatic experience." (SCHMITT, 1972, p. 154).

<sup>7</sup> YEATS, William B. **The Death of Cuchulain**. In: \_\_\_\_\_. **The collected plays of W. B. Yeats**. p. 691-705.

All references from the play will be taken from this edition, hereafter cited in the text in parenthesis as **DC**, followed by indication concerning page number.

<sup>8</sup> The "sea of passions" stands for the turbulence of the outer world; it is necessary to cross the restless waves to reach the Mount of Salvation. 'O Yogui, tendo atravessado o mar das paixões, une-se com a Tranquilidade e possui o 'Si' na sua plenitude,' states SHANKARÂCHÂRYA, *apud* GUÉNON (1982, p. 68).

<sup>9</sup> Shamanism is certainly at the basis of Taoism. While discussing the shamanic flight, the dissemination and antiquity of the symbol, ELIADE (1989, p. 450) asserts, "As for the Taoists, whose legends abound with ascensions and every other kind of miracle, it is probable that they elaborated and systematized the shamanic technique and ideology of protohistorical China and hence have a far better right to be regarded as the successors of shamanism than the exorcists, mediums, and 'possessed' persons."

<sup>10</sup> In her studies concerning the Nordic peoples, BANCROFT (1987, p. 79) asseverates that "the shape of many of the stones is unquestionably phallic." She also quotes BORD, who wonders, 'Can we take this a step further and suggest that the stones were not only symbols, but actual tools, carefully placed for very good reasons? They may have actually been huge stone phalluses, capable of accumulating natural energy and directing it into the earth — impregnating and fertilising the Earth Mother.'

<sup>11</sup> Everything seems to disclose the hero's attainment of a higher sphere. When Aoife winds the scarf round Cuchulain, he says her veils are beautiful and comments that some even have threads of gold. The mentioning of the threads recalls the theme of the line which makes the passage of the spirit easier. (DEVEREUX, 1993, p. 185). The experience of the connection between soul and body by means of a delicate filament takes place exclusively in an altered state of consciousness and only those who die or undergo a dreamlike passage are able to feel it.

Some traditional peoples believed that the soul is attached to the body through a cord or supranatural line. The *washo* indians believe that during sleep, unconsciousness

or a trance-like state, the soul leaves the body but is still connected to it by means of a thin cord made out of the same substance of the soul. (KALWEIT, 1992, p. 73).

Also, the modern spiritualists and “some magic projectionists claim that a silver cord can be seen connecting the physical and ‘astral’ bodies.” (DRURY, 1987, p. 52). All the examples cited clearly illustrate the symbolism of the thread as a bridge that links the different realms of existence.

<sup>12</sup> KALWEIT (1992, p. 257-258) states that “El Arbol Universal — el *axis mundi* que une el cielo, la tierra y el hades — es considerado una abertura o canal hacia otros reinos del ser. Los dioses y seres del más allá descienden por él a la tierra y las almas de los mortales ascienden al cielo. Este eje cósmico mantiene al universo en equilibrio y a la vez es su centro. El Arbol Universal es símbolo de la experiencia cósmica. Sin embargo, debido a las limitaciones del idioma y del pensamiento conceptual, este símbolo ofrece tan sólo una vaga idea de todo esto: una imagen bidimensional de un continuo multidimensional. Sólo se puede conocer el *axis mundi* de manera intuitiva y mística; desafía la descripción racional. Incluso el lenguaje poético, con todas sus sutiles insinuaciones, no es de gran ayuda aquí. Todos los arquetipos, incluso el Arbol Universal, son meras alegorías de un modo de percepción más elevado, exteriorizaciones de una realidad transpersonal. La experiencia del pasaje de un nivel de existencia a otro, de la entrada a otras dimensiones psíquicas, se describe por lo tanto como un descenso al hades o como un ascenso al cielo por el Arbol de la Vida. Si queremos describir o hablar sobre procesos de transformación psíquica — y esto vale también para las experiencias emocionales y mentales en general — nos vemos obligados a utilizar metáforas del mundo material. En todas las culturas, el Inconsciente utiliza imágenes como árboles, cuerdas y demás para transmitir a la inteligencia corriente la idea de la superación de niveles cosmológicos.

Los Arboles Universales, las Montañas Universales, las Columnas Universales son símbolos que permiten a los espíritus venir a nuestro mundo, a los chamanes alcanzar otros reinos cósmicos o a los muertos encontrarse con la divinidad suprema.”

<sup>13</sup> Indiana MATZENBACHER (1985, p. 93-94) deeply analyses the myth of Osiris, the Egyptian god who is the Absolute Light-Principle. While discussing the symbols Zed and Knot, strictly connected to the god, she states, “Pilar consagrado a Osiris, Zed simboliza, ao mesmo tempo, o eixo da terra e a coluna vertebral de Osiris.[...] A ereção da coluna vertebral permite o entrecruzar das forças serpentinhas e a ascensão da Energia Fundamental no tubo de Ouanos; desatar dos Nós, mudanças sucessivas e sutilizadas de estados de consciência, Sabedoria invés de ignorância cósmica são decorrências naturais daquele fato. O objetivo único é ensinar a ressurreição de Hórus em Osiris para fazê-lo dizer: ‘Eu sou Tu’, frase do Livro dos Mortos que tudo revela.

A ênfase dada à coluna vertebral pelos ensinamentos herméticos explica perfeitamente por que Zed (Djed) aparecia sempre como suporte das imagens de Osiris em postura ereta (Djedi). Em posição horizontal-múmia-corpo é incapaz de levantar-se, mover-se rumo ao Céu. Assim é imprescindível endireitar a coluna vertebral de Osiris,

protótipo visível do Canal etérico por onde flui a Energia da Vida, para que haja a ressurreição.”

<sup>14</sup> While describing the role of the horse in shamanic mythology and ritual, ELIADE (1989, p. 467, 470) asseverates that “Pre-eminently the funerary animal and psychopomp, the ‘horse’ is employed by the shaman, in various contexts, as a means of achieving ecstasy, that is, the ‘coming out of oneself’ that makes the mystical journey possible. [...] The ‘horse’ enables the shaman to fly through the air, to reach the heavens. [...] the horse is a mythical image of death and hence is incorporated into the ideologies and techniques of ecstasy. The horse carries the deceased into the beyond; it produces the ‘break-through in plane,’ the passage from this world to other worlds. [...] Psychopomp and funerary animal, the horse facilitated trance, the ecstatic flight of the soul to forbidden regions. The symbolic ‘ride’ expressed leaving the body, the shaman’s ‘mystical death.’”

<sup>15</sup> In many communities, the World Tree takes an important part in the ritual initiation. The access to the sky constitutes the major aspect of an initiation ceremony. The master shaman climbs up a tree, making nine revolutions round the trunk. This symbolizes the soul’s ascension to the sky. Each turn round the trunk represents the passage from one realm to another. (KALWEIT, 1992, p. 257). Cuchulain’s horse might be performing a similar ritual, thus symbolizing his master’s passage through different modes of being.

Added to that, the horse’s triple revolution round the pillar-stone reaffirms “the religious value of the number 3 — [which symbolizes] the three cosmic regions.” (ELIADE, 1989, p. 274).

Both the circle and the number three will be referred to again when Cuchulain gets six (two times three) mortal wounds, when the six heads are exposed, when Emer, like the grey of Macha, dances round them, performing a complete circle for three times. These details reinforce the use of the symbol, and make the play a coherent net of meanings.

<sup>16</sup> In Jungian psychology, the mandala is a symbol representing the effort to reunify the self.

<sup>17</sup> As already pointed out in the analysis of **On Baile’s Strand**, the legend says that after having killed his son, Cuchulain was cast a spell by the druids. They drew their magical circles round him to give him the illusion that, for three days (observe the recurrence of the circle and of the number three), he fights the restless waves of the sea.

<sup>18</sup> Cuchulain’s sexual union with the Hawk-Woman could never be regarded as merely erotic. The Irish sense of *interrelatedness* and the respect for the duality prevailed; in those days, “to move upon the Goddess and farm upon her body as she revealed herself



in hill and vale was to be part of both time and timelessness, matter and spirit.” (BANCROFT, 1987, p. 67).

<sup>19</sup> Cuchulain’s process of enlightenment, compassion and kindness starts even before he goes to the battle field. Even though he believes Eithne is deliberately sending him to his death, he wants the Servant to protect her life as if it were his own. Besides, in case he does not return, he suggests she should be given to Conall because women have called him a good lover.

<sup>20</sup> Cuchulain’s dismemberment recalls the Indian term *brahmarandhra*, that “designates the opening at the top of the skull, which plays a primary role in yogico-tantric techniques and through which the soul takes flight at the moment of death. In this connection we may mention the custom of breaking the skulls of dead yogins, to facilitate the departure of the soul.” (ELIADE, 1959, p. 174). In this sense, Cuchulain’s initiatory beheading is meant to set his soul free so that it can leave his body more easily.

<sup>21</sup> On the Nuba Mountains, “the first initiatory consecration is called ‘head,’ and is said to open the novice’s head for the spirit to enter.” (ELIADE, 1989, p. 55).

<sup>22</sup> Reg SKENE (1974, p. 64) states that “the dance of the severed heads is derived from a very old ritual involving the nature goddess and her slain victim.” Besides that, “the beheading motif is also connected with the symbolist aesthetic in which the figure of dancing Salome was an ideal representation of perfect harmony of being.” (NATHAN, 1966, p. 284, n. 70).

Discussing the cult of the severed head, Anne BANCROFT (1987, p. 115-116) asseverates “the Celts believed that a person’s whole soul lay within the head, and this was both the sacred and the human centre.” Also, she quotes CHADWICK, who affirms that “the sanctuary at Rocquepertuse in France ‘was decorated by a portico of quadruple stone pillars containing niches to hold and display skulls ... and on the cross beam which joined the pillars was perched a stone bird [...], about to take flight.’ Here is the authentic shamanic correspondence between the head, seat of the soul, and the bird whose flight will carry the spirit to its union with the divine (druids were well known for their ability to interpret the cries of birds and were believed to understand bird language).”

<sup>23</sup> There used to be a remarkable ritual among the Yukagir. As ELIADE (1989, p. 245) asseverates, “until the last century the skulls of dead shamans were still venerated; each was set in a wooden figurine, which was kept in a box. Nothing was undertaken without recourse to divination by these skulls.”

<sup>24</sup> It is curious to observe that after the ritual dismemberment (a metaphor for internal change; a symbol for an introspective, psychic rebirth), generally the shamans of all traditions emerge from this process singing or reciting. Analysing this fact, KALWEIT (1982, p. 132) gets to the conclusion that it is easier to communicate

intuitive experiences through music or poetry than by means of ordinary words of daily life. Maybe Yeats had the same sensation or the same view; as a poet, it would be easier for him to use verse-drama as well as the ecstatic dances which can be seen in his plays. The dances have the great advantage of substituting for words. As the Old Man would say, “where there are no words there is less to spoil,” (DC, p. 694) or, as YEATS himself (1978, p. 184) would say, “where there is nothing, there is God.”

<sup>25</sup> As it is known, “Music was anciently considered to be a physical expression of the properties of number and order, with the seven notes of the scale or mode corresponding to the Seven Planets. The use of music [...] gives us a clear image of the order of the cosmos being used to reattune the disorder of the deranged elemental psyche.

While we need this to be explained in some detail, it would have been a central item of general knowledge to the reasonably educated or traditionally orientated listener of the medieval period; such education came either through the church and its inheritance of classical sources plus the influx of Arabic knowledge at the time, or from the traditional power ascribed to bards through long association with Celtic practices going back to pre-Christian era.” (STEWART, 1987, p. 46).

<sup>26</sup> SKENE (1974, p. 71) states that “The form that the unbaked dough of Cuchulain’s spirit will take [...] has important implications for modern Ireland. Cuchulain’s next incarnation will be in the Dublin Post Office among those rebels of Easter week 1916.” This idea is confirmed by MARCUS (1972, p. 144), who believes that “The references to 1916 might suggest rebirth at least as a cultural ideal.”

## CONCLUSION

*All that has form, sound, colour, may be classed under the head of thing. ... But one can attain to formlessness and vanquish death. And with that which is in possession of the eternal, how can mere things compare?*

*Chuang-tzu*

Since the inception of the theatre in ancient Greece, drama has been a major literary form. In its origins, the theatre was essentially ritualistic striving to represent archetypal actions. Modern twentieth century commercial theatre has been cut off from the primitive ritualistic and religious roots. Trying to recover the essentials of drama, a number of writers have fought against the excessive materialism of our age; among them D. H. Lawrence, Ted Hughes, Peter Shaffer, William Butler Yeats, Bernard Shaw, among others. Their intent was to bring back the theatre to its original function, for they believed that the ritualistic experience has a life-renewing power, re-establishing the lost rapport of man and the cosmos.

For Yeats, poetry and art constitute a form of truth superior to all the others for they are not separated from life. He believes that the individual should neither value experience in itself, nor subordinate it to moral or religious principles. His ideas are similar to those of ARTAUD (1993, p. 51) when he says that

the mental weakness of the West, where man has especially confused art and aesthetics, is to believe one can have painting used only as painting, dancing as a plastic form alone, as if one intended to cut art off from everything, to sever the links with all the mystical attitudes they might adopt in confrontation with the absolute.

Yeats sees art as a means to rescue the “transcendence of the universal tragedy of man.” (CAMPBELL, 1973, p. 28). In the same way as Artaud, he understands that the theatre should be used

to express objectively secret truths, to bring out in active gestures those elements of truth hidden under forms in their encounters with Becoming. To do that, to link theatre with expressive form potential, with everything in the way of gestures, sound, colours, movement, is to return it to its original purpose, to restore it to a religious, metaphysical position, to reconcile it with the universe. (ARTAUD, 1993, p. 51).

His use of the Japanese Noh theatre is compatible with this view. By means of gestures, music and dance he gives way to his expression in a well succeeded attempt to revive the ancient roots of the theatre. In his battle against the naturalistic theatre, he abolishes the scenery in order to invite the audience to activate their imagination; faces are covered with masks, delineating the character with large strokes when the moment in which an irrevocable act separates a man from his fellow-creatures or from his own idiosyncrasies is isolated. Yeats sets out “to represent ‘soul’ states rather than people on the stage.” (GASSNER, 1954, p. 230).

Yeats has tried the symbolical dance as a climax to suggest the incursion of the intemporal into the present. The ritualistic character of the dance has the power to overwhelm the audience for it recalls the cultic ceremonies and rituals of religious origin. Yeats believes that “the original and still vital essence of [drama] is creation and elevation into a transformed state of being.” (OTTO, *apud* GADAMER,

1986, p. 59); his intent is to raise the participants out of their everyday existence and to elevate them into a kind of universal communion, leading them to re-enact the sacredness of *illud tempus*. The unearthly beauty that pervades the dance promotes a suspension of time, an instant in which “the remembrance of the past and the present moment coincide in an instantaneous unity” (GADAMER, 1986, p. 59) which possesses its own sort of temporality.

His use of the Noh enabled him to extend the dimensions of his art; by means of dance, costume, music, the spoken word and the mask he could appeal to the senses so as to reach man’s soul and therefore bring him into contact with *anima mundi*. As a matter of fact,

the forms Yeats chose for the expression of the religious experience — poetry, song, dance, drama — are characteristic means for the representation of the religious experience. Reason does not allow for the possibility of the mystical experience of the union of opposites. The ecstatic experience cannot be expressed in literal language. Neither can it be literally shown and comprehended. Expression of it must be such as to maintain the ambiguity between image and reality, subjectivity and objectivity, inherent to it. (SCHMITT, 1972, p. 154).

Yeats felt he could centre a whole play on a single metaphor and present “a vision of life indeed, but painted with the colours of memory, longing or regret.” (WALEY, 19--, p. 27). The indistinguishable effect often produced by the Noh plays did not bother him; he thought it was possible to improve the form. He kept the strangeness and accentuated the dramatic tension, interweaving the natural and the supernatural so as to unexpectedly emphasize the human dilemma. The Yeatsian

paradox was to burst the verisimilitude by means of miracle, aiming at a deeper realism. (ELLMANN, 1991, p. 69,70).

The Noh plays are generally short; they correspond “in length to one act of our five-act plays.” (WALEY, 19--, p. 27). Five plays often form a series in which every single piece is a link necessary for the unity of the whole; they are generally presented at a religious festival. It is curious to observe that Yeats wrote five Cuchulain plays, three of which only after his contact with the Japanese Noh tradition. Even though each one can be read separately as an isolated unit, the series forms a whole that aims at “creating a serene and elegant contemplation of aesthetic beauty and a sense of religious sublimity.” (HOLMAN, 1972, p. 352). An internal unity permeates the texts; all the symbols and adventures reveal a latent power of one text to integrate or continue the other, up to the disclosure of some fundamental themes.

The five plays can be interpreted as independent stages within the Wheel of Life for each one contains elements that reveal a complete initiatory pattern. This fact recalls the theory of the cycles, which is an expression of the states of existence for, as GUÉNON (1987, p. 23) says, all secondary cycles reproduce, up to a certain extent, on a minor scale, phases corresponding to the ones of the greatest cycle to which they are subordinated. Thus, the unity of the five plays corresponds to the primary cycle. Such a theory, which is by no means confined to Celtic symbolism, “represents great cycles reaching through immense periods of historical time, yet it also epitomises

specific reactions or interchanges within the human spirit or psyche.” (STEWART, 1987, p. 169).

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, William Shakespeare’s English history plays signal the advent of England’s national awareness. Yeats, on the other hand, shows a mythical age and avoids historical detail because it ties plays “to specific periods and places rather than bringing out their timeless qualities.” (BROCKETT, 1969, p. 318).

Yeats wanted to make use of the Celtic lore . The traditional tales, images and poems lead him back to an oral tradition which is, as stated by STEWART (1987, p. 3-4),

essentially practical and intimate, not intellectual or formally educational in the modern sense. Many of the spiritual or wisdom elements are preserved in poetry, songs, tales and customs which endured not only into the medieval period, but survived changes of culture and language, and persisted in a concentrated form well into the twentieth century. Such tradition devolves to us from a heroic ‘shamanistic’ and mystical culture, in which the profound depths of both collective and individual imagination were given expression through a fluid alphabet of interlinked symbols.

Much of this culture, which we loosely define as Celtic, persists to the present day, and should not be regarded as a curiosity or escapist fantasy based upon the lost past. The powerful motivations of our ancestors live on within us, and may yet come alive to transform our consciousness. Significantly, this transformation is in the manner of a mutual exchange, for we, by activating the ancient keys to a transformed awareness, also refine the atavistic elements inherent in the primal symbols. They energise us, we purify and carry them forward to a unified future.

Yeats’s interest in rescuing the ritualistic theatre goes parallel with his interest in revitalizing Ireland’s ancient mythology to provide a living faith for his country. However, he cannot be taken exclusively as a parochial Irish poet who

intends to restore values that seem to be threatened with extinction, such as bravery, honesty, nobility, manhood. Trying to ransom these qualities, he goes back to the past to find a basis for his work. He uses mythological material as direct source for events and heroic characters, but he also “draws on myth for stimulus to original conceptions and formulations.” (VICKERY, 1982, p. 69). His skilful handling of this lore makes it stand for more universal matters. As David CLARK (1971, p. 135) says, “Being a creator, the artist is of necessity a destroyer. Like the god of nature, he shatters the old and builds the new.”

In fact, Yeats was not interested in a historical reading of the old sagas for such a reading tends to dim their mythological significance and to reduce their power to stimulate the imagination. “His art denies value to material reality, manifest either in an apprehensible present, a documentable past, or a hypothetical future, seeking instead the transcendent truth to be found in imagination.” (FRIEDMAN, 1975, p. 629). He wanted his work to be invested with a certain religious aura, for “it is sacrality that unveils the deepest structures of the world [...] and the mystery of renewal, youth, and immortality.” (ELIADE, 1959, p. 150). Besides, understanding this spiritual universe advances our knowledge of man.

After reading the plays one realizes that an inexhaustible net of meanings permeates them. In fact, “it is only by ancient symbols, by symbols that have numberless meanings besides the one or two the writer lays an emphasis upon, or the half-score he knows of, that any highly subjective art can escape from the barrenness



and shallowness of a too conscious arrangement, into the abundance and depth of nature.” (YEATS, *apud* VENDLER, 1969, p. 18). Therefore, it would be a very ambitious — if not impossible — project to go over all the symbols within the plays or even to exhaust a single one for, as GASSNER (1965, p. 331) says, if a symbol could be exhausted through a definition, it would not be truly poetical, for in such a case it would have a fixed or rigid meaning.

NEMOTO (*apud* IKEDA, 1979, p. 52) states that “modern man’s tendency is to dissect myths in a clinical fashion and, in the process, to reduce them to lifelessness.” Yeats believed in the power of imagination and affirmed that it was linked to a collective mind, impossible to be explained in terms of the scientific psychology.

In the plays, Yeats worked out his cosmovision in poetic form; he wanted to project his audience out of their personal duration and to incorporate them into other rhythms, to make them live in another ‘history.’ (ELIADE, 1959, p. 205). In the same way as ELIADE (1959, p. 203), Yeats assumed that modern man refuses transcendence and

assumes a new existential situation; he regards himself solely as the subject and agent of history, and he refuses all appeal to transcendence. In other words, he accepts no model for humanity outside the human condition as it can be seen in the various historical situations. Man *makes himself*, and he only makes himself completely in proportion as he desacralizes himself and the world. The sacred is the prime obstacle to his freedom. He will become himself only when he is totally demysticized. He will not be truly free until he has killed the last god.

In an attempt to recover the lost sacrality, besides drawing on myth Yeats also consciously intermingled fairy lore which he had compiled from the peasantry into his retelling of the Cuchulain stories, giving them a new frame. He made use of Lady Augusta Gregory's book, which presents the stories of Cuchulain's life in chronological order. The five plays extend over "the life of the hero from his initiation as a warrior to his eventual death. On the whole, the life of Cuchulain emerges in Yeats's play cycle as tighter, more coherent and more fully human than in the old sagas." (SKENE, 1974, p. 25).

Initially, Yeats focused on Cuchulain's slaying of his son and the succeeding fight with the sea. This incident provided the subject-matter for **On Baile's Strand**, around which he placed the four other plays. Each play can be regarded as an independent ritual of initiation, as well as one stage of the initiation process as a whole.

Since my intention has been to point out the initiatory pattern that can be detected in the Cuchulain cycle, throughout my dissertation the analysis proceeds with the sequence of episodes which correspond to the traditional structure of the initiation grail-type quest. Therefore, the first play I dealt with is **At the Hawk's Well**, in which the hero is still young, followed by **The Green Helmet**, **On Baile's Strand**, **The Only Jealousy of Emer** and **The Death of Cuchulain**, when he finally dies.

In **At the Hawk's Well**, the young hero leaves the kingdom of his father and gets to a distant land to look for the water of immortality (*separation*). In

**The Green Helmet, On Baile's Strand** and **The Only Jealousy of Emer** he faces opposing forces and endures a hard probation period (*initiation*) in which he acquires the knowledge and temperance necessary so that he can finally return and bestow boons onto his fellowmen. In **The Death of Cuchulain** (*return*), he performs the role of a real saviour, getting back to the society which he had left in order to achieve supremacy in the art of healing.

Within the first great stage (*separation* or *departure*) there is a subsection denominated *the call to adventure*, in which I place **At the Hawk's Well**. It is the moment when the young hero separates from the ordinary world. His legendary ancestry symbolically expresses a spiritual continuity (ÉVOLA, 1988, p. 16); it is this spiritual ingredient that he tries to recover in the archetypal journey that leads him into a new zone of experience.

Distant from his own land, the Young Man climbs up a mountain and has contact with superior forces that make him confront his own limits and strength. The difficulties of the task of the hero and its sublime import can be detected in the scenario as well as in the warring antinomies that permeate the play. Cuchulain's fight with the Hawk-Woman and his overcoming her under a yew tree symbolizes the strife of opposites and the search for balance that constitute the very essence of life. As the symbolical unity of spirit and matter fell apart, modern man finds himself uprooted and alienated in a de-souled world.

As stated by JUNG (1975, p. 109-110),

it is therefore not surprising that the unconscious of present-day man, who no longer feels at home in his world and can base his existence neither on the past that is no more nor on the future that is yet to be, should hark back to the symbol of the cosmic tree rooted in this world and growing up to heaven — the tree that is also man. In the history of symbols this tree is described as the way of life itself, a growing into that which eternally is and does not change; which springs from the union of opposites and, by its eternal presence, also makes that union possible. It seems as if it were only through an experience of symbolic reality that man, vainly seeking his own 'existence' and making a philosophy out of it, can find his way back to a world in which he is no longer a stranger.

The synthesis of the contraries is an attempt to rescue the unity of the primordial times when man was still attuned to the the cosmos as well as an attempt to reactualize the *illud tempus*. Cuchulain aims at self-integration and individuation; his "outer world perceptions become acute, and the world literally becomes *new*. The creative energy wells up from within and a knowledge of a *oneness* with all becomes a fact of being." (STEINBRECHER, *apud* DRURY, 1987, p. 84).

Cuchulain's perspective is broadened after his having successfully undergone the first step within his initiatory trial. In **The Green Helmet**, he is faced with a more challenging situation when he is supposed to have his head cut off by the Red Man's shining blade. Striving against his own pride and impulse, he humbly submits to the ordeal in an attempt to re-enact the psychic integrity, spiritual life and liberty of mind that is attained through the personal connection and integration into the universe.

His psychic change follows a metaphysical transformation that manifests in himself as the result of his inner discipline and effort; it is "the result of immense energetic interplays of polarity still mysterious" (STEWART, 1987, p. 184) to our perception of reality. Facing the Red Man, Cuchulain restores the communicability that existed *in illo tempore* between his world and the sacred times.

In **On Baile's Strand**, after the tragic slaying of his own son, Cuchulain searches for total oblivion and the dissolution of all forms in the deep ocean. As stated by ELIADE (1959, p. 210), "every existential crisis once again puts in question both the reality of the world and man's presence in the world. This means that the existential crisis is, finally, 'religious,' since on the archaic levels of culture *being* and *the sacred* are one. [...] it is the experience of the sacred that founds the world [...]."

In his initiatory adventure, Cuchulain eagerly descends into himself

to make his past live, to confront his traumatic experiences again; and, from the point of view of form, this dangerous operation resembles initiatory descents into hell, the realm of ghosts, and combats with monsters. Just as the initiate was expected to emerge from his ordeals victorious — in short, was to 'die' and be 'resuscitated' in order to gain access to a fully responsible existence, open to spiritual values — so [Cuchulain] must confront his own 'unconscious,' haunted by ghosts and monsters, in order to find psychic health and integrity and hence the world of cultural values. (ELIADE, 1959, p. 208).

Rescued from the strand, in **The Only Jealousy of Emer** Cuchulain is offered the opportunity to completely forget all the painful experiences and live in an enchanted kingdom peopled by superhuman beings. He could live in a region of the beyond for he has been able to transpass the barrier that separates the ontological planes. However, this opportunity is presented to him in the form of *temptation*, which is equivalent to an initiation, for it is through facing and avoiding such a temptation that he can transcend the human condition, that is, distinguish himself from the profane masses. (ELIADE, 1989, p. 377). Even in a trance-like state he chooses to keep the memory of the past events so that he can remember the teachings received

within his initiatory pattern and, at a later stage, help his fellowmen through his experience.

In **The Death of Cuchulain**, the hero's return and reintegration with society so as to communicate the spiritual wisdom he has acquired is "indispensable to the continuous circulation of spiritual energy into the world." (CAMPBELL, 1973, p. 36). Cuchulain is "sacrificed *in time* for the benefit of [his] people, land, or planet." (STEWART, 1987, p. 176). Through his exemplary behaviour and heroic death — which is a paradigm of life lived with utmost dignity — Cuchulain is able to rescue the values of the society he lives in and to disseminate the knowledge, transcendence and cure it lacks.

The need for the poet/healer/shaman/saviour/saint is reaffirmed and reactualized through Yeats's poetic theatre. In our modern world, all the vital experiences have been desacralized and "deprived of spiritual significance, hence deprived of their truly human dimension." (ELIADE, 1959, p. 168). Trying to rescue the spiritual qualities of life, Cuchulain assumes the role of a saviour or of a shaman, who is essentially "a healer of the spirit, embodying a quality little understood in the west today. He heals the rift between man's inner and outer worlds." (BANCROFT, 1987, p. 23). His accomplishments reveal to his fellowmen another world. He is the active principle of the exemplary pattern by means of which the people can release themselves from time and dissolve into a chaos from which they can be "reborn into the purity of the primal condition." (BANCROFT, 1987, p. 23).

Yeats believed in an ideal world of heroic passions. “The tragic character, as he conceives it, is imbued with a passion so pure and intense that it achieves contact with this ideal world. The tragic experience may involve renunciation but ecstasy is its distinctive characteristic.” (ARMSTRONG, 1970, p. 9). He was convinced that, in the long run, art in general (not only literature) was a powerful means to remodel society and incite people to try and rescue the dignity and the heroic spirit that seem to have been lost.

Yeats assumed that in our time man has voluntarily cut himself off from the cosmos; therefore he has lost the power to see the interdependence of all things in the universe. Deprived of a holistic view — which leads back to the Celtic cosmovision and the sense of interrelatedness that is at the basis of Buddhism and shamanism —, modern man does not understand that the cosmic equilibrium is based on the tension of opposites that keeps the Wheel of Life in movement. Yeats believed in the need for a saviour or a hero, “the man in fury, possessed by his own tumultuous and burning energy.” (ELIADE, 1975, p. 84). He saw struggle as a means to maintain the cosmic balance of the universe and incentivated poets and his fellowmen by saying, “Dear predatory birds, prepare for war, [...] love war [...]. Belief is renewed continually in the ordeal of death.” (YEATS, 1977, p. 52-53).

The Cuchulain plays were also intended to incite patriotism in his native country, as well as to rescue such values as bravery, honour and courage, the qualities necessary to keep the heroic ideal alive. Yeats intended to get to a synthesis “where

the poetic past created the potential future.” (STEWART, 1987, p. 10). Cuchulain undergoes several trials and some really devastating life experiences whose astonishing power transforms and amplifies his regular flow of consciousness. He endures cycles of change which might be read as “allegories of our inner condition.” (STEWART, 1987, p. 15). He faces hard struggle and great tensions that are “consubstantial with the human condition and therefore can never be completely done away with.” ELIADE (1959, p. 207). Yet Cuchulain emerges from them victorious.

Yeats wanted his audience to symbolically undergo a similar initiatory process. Through watching the plays, they would be able to re-live the regeneration ritual and by active participation they would realize that

initiation is so closely linked to the mode of being of human existence that a considerable number of modern man's acts and gestures continue to repeat initiatory scenarios. Very often the 'struggle for life,' the 'ordeals' and 'difficulties' that stand in the way of a vocation or a career, in some sort reiterate the ordeals of initiation; it is after the 'blows' that are dealt him, the moral and even physical 'suffering' and 'torture' he undergoes, that a young man 'proves' himself, knows his possibilities, grows conscious of his powers, and finally becomes himself, spiritually adult and creative (the spirituality is, of course, what is understood as such in the modern world). For every human existence is formed by a series of ordeals, by repeated experience of 'death' and 'resurrection.' (ELIADE, 1959, p. 208-209).

The cycles are perpetual. Cuchulain was able to break free from the human cycle; “he is a spiritual being, transformed from the human state into a higher mode of consciousness, yet still human.” (STEWART, 1987, p. 6). He arrived at a ‘central’ position in order to restore the primordial state and to recover the ‘sense of unity’ that modern man has lost. Cuchulain’s initiatory ordeal reaffirms the validity of the



warring opposites and hard trial, since strife is the very essence of being and, in so far as human existence is concerned, it is in itself an initiation.

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